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ON THE GROUND

The worst places on earth to give birth

Chief international correspondent **Bel Trew** travels across the Central African Republic and Nigeria meeting women risking their lives for motherhood

Infantino must resign with as much grace as he can muster

In sport as in so much of life, a sensible leader will quit while they're winning, and a decade in charge of any major organisation is generally a good time to blow the final whistle. That would be true even when things are going well. In the case of Gianni Infantino, president of Fifa for the time being, that is patently not the case, and has not been for some time.

One way or another, his botched attempt to hand a critical interest in the World Cup over to private equity, and to someone closely linked to the Trump family to boot, will end his career, and rightly. But that will only raise fresh questions about the way football is run at this level, and what its future will look like.

In the world of sport, the stakes could scarcely be higher.

The irony is that world football needs investment as much as any sport, and is already closely involved with the commercial world, with television rights, sponsorship, merchandise and so on.

Mr Infantino could usefully have sparked a debate about how that should evolve. That he instead tried to hoodwink everyone into a get-rich-quick scheme was his tragic, and rather foolish, mistake.

It doesn't take too much of an effort to recall the dramatic circumstances of his rise to the top of international football governance in 2016. He replaced Sepp Blatter, a man so mired in allegations of corruption that they overwhelmed even Fifa's morbid complacency.

On arrival, Mr Infantino promised change and reform. In some respects, it's fair to say he succeeded, and for the lasting good of the game.

He was the first president of Fifa to pay much attention to the women's game, to developing grassroots support in emerging nations, and especially boosting African participation in the World Cup.

To his credit, he at last managed to help football gain some traction in North America. Mr Infantino also set about cleaning up Fifa. He promised transparency and declared: "The money of Fifa is your money. It's not the money of the Fifa president. It's your money. You are the national associations and the money of Fifa has to serve for the development of football and not for anything else."

Ten years on, and those words ring hollow. Somehow, like any once bright footballer whose form slides into irreversible decline, Mr Infantino lost his way.

He has been accused of interfering in crucial disciplinary matters according to his own discretion – reversing a suspension on Cristiano Ronaldo last December, and the infamous revocation of a red card issued to US squad member Folarin Balogun during the World Cup tournament – a decision involving President Trump.

"Dynamic" ticket prices were set obscenely high. The discriminatory treatment of the Somali referee Omar Artan and the Iranian team was shameful. Hydration breaks and a turgid half-time show in the final were also offensive.

Much of that was tolerated because Mr Infantino appeased Mr Trump. In return, Mr Trump seems to like Mr Infantino so much that he informally nominated him to be the next secretary general of the United Nations.

Some took that to be a direct quid pro quo for Mr Infantino awarding the ludicrous Fifa Peace Prize to Mr Trump, who understands geopolitics about as much as he does the offside rule.

The Fifa president’s implausible plan to sell a 21 per cent stake in the World Cup to private investors therefore came as a shock but not so much a surprise to anyone who has observed Mr Infantino’s recent gravitation towards money, power and the orbit of Mr Trump. The fact that it was backed by Joshua Kushner’s investment fund – the brother of President Trump’s son-in-law Jared – only heightened suspicions.

Perhaps the worst aspect of the secret manoeuvring was that Mr Infantino assumed he could get away with it without the support of the most powerful football association, Uefa in Europe, as well as Concacaf representing the North and Central American and Caribbean nations.

The crude £30m bung to football associations in smaller and poorer nations was an insult to anyone’s intelligence. As the World Cup was gradually privatised, as was going be inevitable in this plan, they would see less and less such money, and lose more and more influence.

Even if Mr Infantino could have swung the votes in the one-nation-one-vote structure of Fifa, the declared threat of boycott from Uefa and Concacaf would end the deal. Without European involvement, there is no World Cup.

Mr Infantino’s position now resembles that of any democratic politician who has lost the confidence of his own party. The Fifa chief still has backing from grateful associations in some places favoured during his tenure, for example as destinations for the World Cup – Qatar, Morocco and the African body, the CAF; and he may thus have sufficient votes on the Fifa Council to evade immediate defenestration via an emergency meeting.

However, to draw an unhappy comparison, he is now limping around the pitch having suffered a severe injury by pushing his luck. He will have to be substituted, preferably by someone from Africa who can balance the realpolitik power exerted by UEFA and Concacaf.

He’s lost the fans and the dressing room, and he really has no alternative but to retire with as much grace as he can muster.

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Inside the worst places on Earth to give birth

The Independent’s chief international correspondent, **Bel Trew**, travelled across the Central African Republic and Nigeria, speaking to women who are risking their lives for motherhood

Blessing, in Nigeria, feared she might die in childbirth as her sister did after four days in labour when her husband couldn’t afford to pay hospital bills *(Photos Bel Trew/The Independent)*

The muted beeps of the neonatal intensive care unit are drowned out by a sudden scramble of sound. A bundle is rushed into the corridor of this hospital in the Central African Republic (CAR) with a gaggle of people in its wake.

Under the swaddle of cloth is a newborn baby girl, eyes closed, her chest heaving with tortured, syncopated breaths.

Nurses quickly connect the baby up to a confusion of monitors, tubes and drips. A roar of a ventilator kicks in. The baby's grandmother looks on anxiously.

Emmaus Johann, the doctor and seventh-year medical student, looks grimly at the statistics on the monitor. They have tried intubation, ventilation and now CPR. Blood is seeping onto the blanket. The newborn's face goes grey. Her tiny body gives in.

"There was no ambulance. The only ambulance had taken a different child. There is nothing else out there," the doctor says as the baby's grandmother shatters into sobs in the background.

"They came just like that... by motorbike," he continues, trailing off.

Doctors try to save a newborn's life after she is brought in on a motorcycle to the CAR's only paediatric hospital

This is the only dedicated paediatric hospital in the whole of the CAR, a small landlocked country of five million people that suffers from some of the highest maternal and early infant mortality rates in the world.

This little girl has been brought in from a rural area 10km outside the capital. After a difficult labour, she was struggling with birth asphyxia. She had been on this earth for about two hours, and had spent almost all of it on the back of a speeding motorcycle in the desperate rush to get here.

“There’s a lack of equipment and care. There should be a neonatology service out there. But there isn’t one,” Dr Johann continues.

“If the baby comes to us this late without oxygen, we cannot resuscitate her; it’s part of our daily routine,” he adds quietly.

And the fear is this horrific situation is only going to get worse.

For centuries, giving birth was one of the most dangerous conditions a woman could go through: mothers and their babies died regularly in childbirth. But over the last 25 years, that changed. Combined global efforts saw maternal mortality plunge by 40 per cent. Until now.

Now, the United Nations, aid agencies and humanitarian organisations are all sounding the alarm that progress is stalling, and in some cases reversing, across the world, including even in the UK.

Dr Kango Semplice tends to children in the CAR's only paediatric hospital

The biggest factor is unprecedented aid cuts, first triggered by Donald Trump's gutting of USAID in 2025, followed by European countries, including the UK, channelling foreign aid into defence. Compounding the crisis is an unprecedented level of conflict worldwide. Researchers say that 2025 saw the highest number of conflicts between states since the Second World War, and the highest number of fatalities recorded since the Rwandan genocide.

Although there is no aggregated global data since aid cuts were introduced last year, the signs are grim.

In the CAR, not only does it struggle with some of the highest maternal and infant mortality rates in the world and its own internal conflict, it is now dealing with an influx of refugees from neighbouring war-ravaged Sudan.

Women in the CAR are 60 times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than in the United Kingdom, according to the United Nations' latest data. For every 100,000 births in the country, 829 women die.

At the only paediatric hospital in the country, Dr Kango Semplice, head of the emergency department, says this is translating into deaths.

“The cuts were sudden. The country had just been getting back on its feet after conflict. We’ve had no funding since last year. With the little money that we have, we are targeting the children that can be treated free of charge. I can assure you there will be deaths, both among babies and their mothers.”

Among the projects slashed were programmes led by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), which lost $3m in funding alone.

New data shows 11 million people have lost access to their essential sexual and reproductive health and protection services. Almost 1,100 health facilities and mobile clinics were forced to close, while an additional 727 facilities were disrupted, operating with reduced staff, limited hours or shortages of medicines and supplies. Almost 6,000 health service providers lost their jobs, including frontline health workers and midwives.

Sudanese refugee mothers camp in the courtyard of the only hospital in Birao, CAR

“When services get shut down, when maternity wards close, the mortality rate rises. It’s as simple as that,” explains Monica Ferro, head of UNFPA in London. “That will mean that they will have no skilled birth attendants. They will have no access to medicines to treat the most preventable causes of maternal death.

“This is completely unacceptable. No woman should die of childbirth, giving life.”

Conflict, climate change, and the weight of external debt are preventing countries like the CAR from becoming less dependent on external help, she continues.

“This is the perfect storm gathering. You have more people moving, more people in need and health systems that are stretched to the limit with less funding.”

In Birao, located just 60km from the Sudanese border, families are camping in the courtyard of the city’s hospital, which only has 60 beds, covering a local and refugee influx of more than 40,000 people. Many of them are pregnant mothers and their children, piling pressure on the already inadequate medical centres.

At the maternity ward, eight of the 12 medics lost their jobs following aid cuts over the last year, including all four midwives.

Radiya confirms her aunt Amna, who has malaria, just lost her baby at nine months and nearly bled to death herself

Delphine Zanaba, an assistant nurse, manages hundreds of consultations alone, at a time when the number of pregnant women coming every day has increased threefold.

She tries to comfort Amna, 37, a mother-of-six, who is screaming in agony just hours after losing her baby at nine months, and nearly bleeding to death herself.

Zanaba says she came in this morning with malaria, and her baby was breech and stillborn, both of which could have been prevented.

"The pregnancy hadn't been monitored at all; this is a recurring problem. They don't come for a single consultation for the entire pregnancy, not even one."

Her niece, Radiya, 24, who fled slaughter at the hands of militants in Darfur with her on foot last year, says Amna would have had prenatal consultations and been treated if the mobile clinics in the nearby refugee camp where they live had not closed.

Delphine Zanaba, a nurse, tends to a mother who just lost her baby at nine months and nearly died herself

She keeps asking for her mother and saying she doesn't want to live any more," she adds in distress.

"There used to be many more midwives... If this was available, the baby would have survived."

Outside the ward, the hospital's lead doctor, Ngonzo Lezin, explains they are the only hospital in a 20km radius. Since the massive reduction in aid, women have to pay for their care and so are not coming in any more.

"Women are forced to give birth at home, in the camps. The numbers of deaths will increase, both mothers and children. It will be distressing not just for Birao but for the country."

In the nearby refugee camp, a mobile clinic and safe space supported by UNFPA used to provide medical care, pre- and post-natal care and hospital transport for pregnant women. It was one of four such spaces in Birao serving thousands of women. Those have closed without US funding, along with two US-backed health facilities.

UNFPA's programme officer, Marie-Justine Mamba-Ibingui, shows off what are now just piles of rubble.

Refugee mothers wait for care and treatment at the only hospital in Birao

"The women bitterly regretted the closure of the site here. And for me, too, it is bitter to see women taking risks when they want to give life. It's heartbreaking," she adds.

Mothers, who are waiting by what was the centre, recount their horror stories.

There, Busayna, 25, a mother-of-five who gave birth seven months ago, nearly died after she had to walk miles mid-labour to the hospital because there were no longer services in the camp.

Busayna's husband was murdered by militants as they fled on a donkey from El Fasher, where human rights experts believe a genocide has taken place. En route, armed groups tried to rape the women, and when their husbands intervened, they killed all the men.

"I'm just too exhausted; there are so many troubles. My husband is dead and we ended up on the street."

Busayna's sister bled to death while giving birth when the family didn't have enough money to buy the blood she needed

"When it was time for me to give birth, I had to walk to the hospital. They told me there was no transportation available at night, so I went on foot. There was no aftercare. I gave birth that same night and left immediately."

This is playing out all over the world. In primary healthcare facilities in Nigeria's restive northern states, mothers in the waiting rooms recount similar stories.

Nigeria has long been the worst place to give birth on earth. The country accounts for well over a quarter, or 29 per cent, of all estimated maternal deaths worldwide. In 2023, there were 75,000 maternal deaths, one death every seven minutes.

Part of the issue is the lack of doctors. In Nigeria, there is only one doctor to 9,000 patients; in the UK, that ratio is one to around 1,700.

That means primary healthcare centres, staffed by nurses and midwives, are often the first and only port of call for pregnant women, despite having almost no supplies.

Blessing's sister died, as did her baby, after three gruelling days in labour, because the family didn't have the money to take her to hospital. When Blessing was pregnant with twins and showing all the signs of deadly pre-eclampsia, she was terrified she might follow the same fate.

Blessing says she is still suffering from the aftermath of nearly dying giving birth

“It was not easy for me; I was very scared. I had a seizure; I even collapsed. They said they needed to operate on me and I started crying because I know that my husband cannot afford the money,” she continues, explaining the hospital bills were the equivalent of two years’ salary. Family and friends started frantically crowdsourcing the funds.

“I thank God for my life and that my babies survived.”

The facility manager of this centre in Adamawa state in northeast Nigeria, Simka Zamani, says the biggest issue is that they sometimes only get 30 minutes of power a day.

They also lack drugs and staff to help with the influx of women who only attend these centres because they can’t afford hospital bills. This centre used to be supported by NGOs who helped purchase essential drugs and equipment for the most underprivileged women, but that has all gone in the last year.

Similar concerns are voiced at a second primary health centre. There, the handful of women in the waiting room had lost 15 babies between them. Asina lost her baby just two days before.

Hawwa, 40, who is pregnant with her 13th child, said six of her babies have died in childbirth, and she has got to the point where she dreads being pregnant, but a lack of funding means she has no access to family planning. “It is very traumatising because where you give birth to a child and they survive, I fear the next one will die. I always fear the one I’m carrying will die,” she continues.

Asina had lost her baby two days previously, and Hawwa had lost six of 13 children

Nigerian health officials, like the doctors in CAR, fear that the situation will only get worse as funding cuts and conflict bite. Nigerian security forces have been battling a 12-year insurgency in the restive north of the country, as Boko Haram militants morph into multiple groups, including the so-called Islamic State.

The situation has got so bad that Donald Trump authorised multiple bombing raids on Nigeria at the end of 2025 and into this year.

“The cessation of the US funding was so abrupt, short notice; there was no adequate window for transition,” says Dr Sulaiman Saidu Bashir, executive chairman of Adamawa State Primary Healthcare Department.

“And if we don’t address this problem here, it may spill over to other places, and it contributes to a global burden.”

Back in the CAR, nurse Zanaba is working her way through dozens of women in a makeshift waiting room. Most of them are refugees with terrifying stories of escaping drone strikes and slaughter.

"No woman should unnecessarily die in birth; we must stop this. I didn't want to lose a mother. I don't want to lose a mother. No more maternal deaths. It must stop now."

This article has been produced as part of The Independent's Rethinking Global Aid project

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Newborn deaths are surging in the world's most vulnerable communities as aid cuts hit

Mothers across sub-Saharan Africa face a perfect storm of conflict, displacement and global aid cuts that are leaving them without the help they need. **Liz Cookman** and Nick Ferris report

A children's hospital in the Central African Republic *(Bel Trew/The Independent)*

Deaths of newborns have risen by more than 80 per cent among the most vulnerable people across sub-Saharan Africa in the wake of global aid cuts, including by the UK and US.

Data covering more than three million refugee women across 20 nations, given exclusively to *The Independent,* shows that neonatal mortality – deaths within the first 28 days after birth – rose by 81 per cent between 2025 and 2026. That is a rise from 3.1 to 5.6 deaths per 1,000 live births, according to the UN refugee agency (UNHCR).

While the agency makes clear the data does not establish the cause, or that aid cuts were the sole factor behind the rise, it does show that indicators of child survival are worsening. Deaths within the first year of life have also increased by 111 per cent, from 8.3 to 17.5 deaths per 1,000 live births. Mortality for children under five also rose by 50 per cent.

Through an analysis of this data, plus that from other UN agencies, charities and NGOs, *The Independent* can reveal a grim picture of maternal and child health across Africa as sweeping cuts to international aid and the lifesaving programmes it funded begin to bite.

- More than 11 million people have lost access to essential sexual and reproductive health and protection services, according to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA)
- Almost 1,100 UNFPA health facilities and mobile clinics have been forced to close, while a further 727 are operating with reduced staff, limited hours or shortages of medicines and supplies
- Nearly 6,000 healthcare workers, including frontline staff and midwives, have lost their jobs

There are increasing fears among those working in the development sector that years of progress in reducing maternal and newborn deaths could be reversed by the steep decline in international aid.

“Global maternal mortality trends already show us where women’s lives are most at risk, and sub-Saharan Africa remains at the centre of this crisis,” said Dr Mitchell Sangma, a health adviser at Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF).

“Countries depend heavily on external humanitarian and health system support to keep essential services running. When those lifelines are cut without health authorities stepping up, the consequences are predictable. I fear even more maternal deaths will happen quietly in communities, unseen and unrecorded.”

In Nigeria, 386 health facilities and mobile clinics – a significant number of which deal with maternal health – closed during 2025 and early 2026, cutting off care for around 380,000 people. Meanwhile, more than 100,000 people lost access to essential health services in the Central African Republic.

Both countries are featured in *Hard Labour*, the new documentary for Independent TV, by our chief international correspondent Bel Trew. It exposes how efforts to stop women and babies dying in childbirth have been blunted, with aid cuts playing a significant role.

A refugee from Sudan at a health facility in the Central African Republic *(Bel Trew/The Independent)*

Significant progress in tackling preventable maternal mortality across the globe had seen the rate decline by 40 per cent in the last two decades, but this had started to slow, even before the slashing of billions of pounds from global aid.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the average annual decline in global maternal mortality rate was 1.5 per cent between 2013 and 2023, a figure significantly below the 2.6 per cent recorded between 2000 and 2010.

The benchmark is the UN Sustainable Development Goal, laid out in 2015, for the global maternal mortality rate to fall below 70 deaths per 100,000 live births by 2030.

The latest data puts the global maternal mortality rate at 197 per 100,000 live births, with a number of nations significantly above that.

Seventy-five per cent of deaths are due to either severe bleeding, infections, high blood pressure during pregnancy, complications from delivery, or unsafe abortion.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which works with more than 100 countries, has projected that official development assistance for health could fall by between 29 and 46 per cent between 2024 and 2026, equivalent to between $5bn and $8bn.

Funding for population and reproductive health, including HIV and sexually transmitted infection programmes, is expected to fall by as much as 54 per cent.

A study published in March estimated that the Trump administration's aid cuts could increase maternal mortality by an average of 45 per cent across Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Chad, Mali, Niger and Nigeria.

The researchers projected around 1,000 additional maternal deaths per 100,000 live births across the six countries within a single year.

"The world has made remarkable progress in reducing maternal deaths over the past two decades, proving that these deaths are not inevitable when women can access quality healthcare," said Sarah Shaw, of advocacy group MSI Reproductive Choices.

"But across many of the countries where MSI Reproductive Choices works, cuts to global health funding, alongside conflict and displacement, are making it harder for women to access essential reproductive services."

In Somalia, CARE International says that, since January, it has been forced to close 50 of the 80 health and nutrition centres it supported because of funding shortfalls, with another 15 due to shut by October.

They are already seeing a spike in severe malnutrition – in a country that has one of the highest maternal mortality ratios in the world.

“This is a devastating blow to families who rely on us for basic healthcare and lifesaving nutrition,” said Ummy Dubow, CARE’s Somalia country director. “When these centres shut down, pregnant women and young children pay the ultimate price.”

Save The Children estimates that Somalia also faces a shortage of around 20,000 midwives, while some hospital staff have faced up to a 90 per cent reduction in salaries, which has left midwives around the country effectively volunteering to keep services running.

Globally, the WHO has said the shortfall of midwives could reach between 690,000 and 830,000 by 2030 – with Africa bearing the brunt of the burden, as it will carry 46 per cent of the deficit.

The findings have renewed calls across the political spectrum for the UK, and the government under new prime minister Andy Burnham, to reverse cuts to the overseas aid budget, which will fall from 0.5 to 0.3 per cent of Gross National Income through to 2029.

Nine African countries are set to see their UK bilateral aid cut by more than 80 per cent, while overall bilateral UK aid to African countries is set to fall from £1.6bn to under £700m.

Sarah Champion, chair of parliament’s International Development Committee and a Labour MP, said: “The Trump administration has politicised maternal and sexual health. Not only has it dramatically cut funding, it has also orchestrated a chilling effect on other donor countries.

“It is the babies and mothers in the poorest countries who are bearing the brunt of his ideology. The UK has been very clear on its focus on women and girls, this is the right approach; but these stark findings show that is just not the reality on the ground.

“Unless the international community comes together to support low-income countries, I fear the situation will only get worse.”

Andrew Mitchell, a former international development secretary and Conservative MP for Sutton Coldfield, added: “These figures lay bare the appalling effects of these cuts and the damage to the most vulnerable as well as to Britain’s reputation.

“Surely it is not too much to ask that a new prime minister looks again at this and puts right the errors of judgement of [Boris] Johnson and [Keir] Starmer.”

Monica Harding, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for international development, called on Mr Burnham to take decisive action to prevent “further tragic loss of life”.

“The government cannot claim to be empowering women and girls around the world while pushing on with immoral and strategically illiterate aid cuts, gutting the basic healthcare, life-saving protection, and maternal services keeping them and their babies alive,” she said.

It was early 2025 when the Trump administration abruptly dismantled the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the world’s largest provider of humanitarian and development aid. It cancelled thousands of health and aid programmes almost overnight.

The speed of the cuts left UN agencies and charities with little time to find alternative funding or wind down services safely. Then came the announcement that UK aid cuts would follow, in order to help pay for an increase in defence funding.

Internal USAID modelling found the funding freeze could affect services for 16.8 million pregnant women each year and eliminate postnatal care for 11.3 million newborns during their first two days of life.

France, Germany and the Netherlands have all announced further reductions to their aid budgets, with several governments citing the need to increase defence spending in response to growing security threats.

Aid organisations have warned that women and newborns are likely to bear the heaviest burden, as maternal healthcare, emergency obstetric services and reproductive health programmes are among those most affected.

Earlier this year, projections published in *The Lancet* suggested that reductions in foreign aid could contribute to 23 million additional deaths across 93 low- and middle-income countries by 2030.

“We know how to prevent the majority of maternal deaths. What we need is political will and international co-operation,” said Samy Ahmar, head of global health at Save the Children UK.

George Ayres, from Plan International UK, added: “These deaths are preventable. Every cut to aid is putting more mothers and babies at risk. World leaders must act now to protect maternal health and ensure mothers can access the care they need.”

This article has been produced as part of The Independent’s Rethinking Global Aid project

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Extra officers set to tackle small boat gangs as PM pledges ‘relentless’ fight

Burnham promises to get a ‘grip’ on the Channel crossings issue rather than ‘play politics’

Athena Stavrou Political Reporter

More than 2,000 people have crossed the Channel in small boats since Andy Burnham became PM *(AFP/Getty)*

Andy Burnham has vowed to be “relentless” in tackling smuggling gangs and driving down small boat crossings.

On a visit to Dover yesterday, the prime minister said he was not “complacent” on the issue of the Channel crossings as he announced a boost to the number of officers deployed to tackle the gangs.

Mr Burnham highlighted that crossings are down significantly compared to the number for this time last year, but promised to get a “grip” on the situation rather than “play politics”.

“Clearly, progress is being made, but we’re not complacent, and it’s why I am here,” he said. “It’s why I’ve come down on Sunday to see the team to listen to what they think needs to be done, what further can be done. So we’re just going to be relentless.

“People want to see this issue addressed. I heard that on the doorsteps in Makerfield, but we also need to build a system that offers safe routes for people as well, because that also takes away the selling point of the gangs.

Burnham said the small boat crossings are down significantly compared to the number for this time last year *(AFP/Getty)*

“So on every level we’ve got to cover this… crucially, increasing the enforcement activity.”

Latest figures show that more than 2,000 people have crossed the Channel in small boats since Mr Burnham became prime minister.

Home Office numbers show 326 migrants arrived on Saturday in four boats, bringing the number up to 2,057 since Mr Burnham took over from Sir Keir Starmer on 20 July. There were 1,962 crossings in the same period last year, with the total for the year so far having dropped significantly compared with this time in 2025.

Since the start of 2025, the number of National Crime Agency (NCA) officers tackling organised immigration crime has more than doubled from 376 to almost 800.

More than 1,000 small boats or engines have been seized since Labour came into power in 2024 and pledged to crack down on the supply of equipment to smuggling gangs who take migrants across the Channel.

The PM said the British public ‘don’t like the idea that the border looks like it’s not controlled’ *(PA Wire)*

Asked if he wanted to change the tone of the debate on the issue, Mr Burnham said: “We have to deal with the issue rather than play politics with the issue. Just deal with it head on, grip it, and then make the changes that will bring that reassurance to the public.

“The public don’t like the idea that the border looks like it’s not controlled. We need to bring back that control, but also we need to offer support for people who genuinely need it.

“It’s about changing the whole approach, and slowly but surely we are putting in place those building blocks of a very different approach to this issue. It’s working, but there’s more to be done.”

The announcement comes as more than 60 people are now reported to have died after around 60,000 migrants crossed into the Spanish exclave of Ceuta from Morocco on Thursday in extraordinary scenes.

The incident has caused division in the EU, with Italy temporarily suspending the border-free Schengen arrangement with Madrid in a move backed by Finland and Denmark.

Mr Burnham said he had been in contact with the Spanish leader Pedro Sanchez and that the "immediate issue" had been dealt with.

More than 1,000 small boats or engines have been seized since Labour came into power in 2024 and pledged to crack down on the supply of equipment to smuggling gangs who take migrants across the Channel *(AFP/Getty)*

"I've exchanged messages with the Spanish prime minister, and the news from Spain is that around 98 per cent of the people who came into Spanish territory last week have now been returned to Morocco, and there's an agreement between Spain and Morocco to that effect," said Mr Burnham.

"So that substantially deals with the immediate issue. But of course there's a broader issue about the Schengen area and our relationship with it, and of course I would want to be in regular dialogue with the EU on those issues."

Asked if he would like to be at the table for coming emergency EU talks on the situation in Ceuta, he said: “It’s a matter for the EU as to whether or not, but our team certainly will be feeding into those discussions.”

Shadow home secretary Chris Philp accused the prime minister of being “weak” as he insisted Labour has not “smashed the gangs” as promised.

“I saw for myself just last week, hundreds of illegal immigrants departing a French beach while the gendarmes Shabana Mahmood is paying for stood by and did nothing,” he said.

“The Conservative plan is to leave the ECHR so all illegal immigrants can be deported with a week of arrival. If Andy Burnham was serious he would do this – but he’s too weak.”

NCA
National Crime Agency

Home secretary Shabana Mahmood during her visit to hear about the work of the National Crime Agency *(PA Wire)*

Meanwhile, home secretary Ms Mahmood visited NCA headquarters in Stratford, where she said she was “laser-light focused” and would do “whatever it takes” to secure the country’s border.

Speaking to reporters yesterday afternoon, Ms Mahmood said: “I think the most important thing that people need to hear from their home secretary is that I'm doing whatever it takes to secure our border.

"And that is what I've been absolutely laser-light focused on from the moment I became the home secretary – taking all of the measures that I know are needed in order to secure our border."

Asked why 2,000 people had crossed the Channel in small boats since Mr Burnham took office, Ms Mahmood said the NCA's work was having an "impact".

"That's why we're doubling the number of NCA officers, because we know that this is the work we need to do in order to secure our border," she said.

She also said the number of deaths of people crossing the Channel had been "normalised". She said four migrants had died trying to cross the Channel in the past few days, describing each of those deaths as a "tragedy".

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UK ‘at risk of recession’ if Strait of Hormuz remains closed into 2027

EY’s latest economic outlook also warns inflation could rise to 6.4% as oil and gas prices soar

Holly Williams

EY’s chief economist said the UK economy had proved ‘resilient’, but this would be tested if war in the Middle East continued *(AFP/Getty)*

Britain’s economy could be sent into a recession next year if the crucial Strait of Hormuz remains closed into 2027, a new report has warned.

The latest EY economic outlook warns that if the Middle East conflict is not resolved and the vital waterway – through which a fifth of the world’s oil and gas is normally carried – remains shut until early or mid-2027, gross domestic product (GDP) could grow by just 0.5 per cent this year and contract by 0.2 per cent next year.

This adverse scenario could see inflation soar to 6.4 per cent by the end of 2026 due to surging oil and energy prices, the report cautions.

However, if the Strait of Hormuz reopens by the end of the third quarter of this year, EY's base case forecast suggests growth will remain fairly resilient. EY has upgraded its outlook to 0.9 per cent expansion in 2026, having previously pencilled in 0.8 per cent, and maintains its prediction for 1.2 per cent growth in 2027.

The report also sees interest rates remaining at 3.75 per cent for the rest of 2026 and then being cut twice in April and July next year, ending 2027 at 3.25 per cent.

A fifth of the world's oil and gas is normally carried through the Strait of Hormuz *(Reuters)*

It follows the Bank of England's latest rates decision last week, which saw it vote to hold at 3.75 per cent, but signal it stands ready to hike rates if the Iran war continues for many months and sends inflation rocketing.

The Bank suggested that Consumer Prices Index (CPI) inflation, which was recorded at 2.6 per cent in June, is likely to peak around 3.2 per cent later this year, before steadily easing back towards the Bank's 2 per cent inflation target.

Peter Arnold, EY UK chief economist, said: “The UK economy has proved more resilient than many expected this year, prompting a modest upgrade to our growth forecast.

“Ongoing disruption to global energy markets will now start to test this economic resilience.

“If the Strait of Hormuz reopens in the coming months, we expect the UK to avoid a more pronounced downturn, but an extended closure into 2027 would raise inflation and could push the economy into contraction next year.”

The report cut its prediction for business investment to a fall of 0.7 per cent in 2026, down from a previous forecast for it to remain stable.

Household spending is also set to remain subdued as consumers face higher prices and delayed interest rate cuts, with consumer spending expected to grow by 0.3 per cent in 2026 before improving to 0.9 per cent in 2027.

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Burnham pledges further support to ease the cost of living pressures

Chancellor Healey says he will stop the public being ‘taken for a ride’ on food and petrol prices

Athena Stavrou Political reporter

The PM has begun his tenure in Downing Street with a spate of measures aimed at reducing costs for families *(PA)*

Andy Burnham has promised more cost of living support is on the way as his chancellor vowed to stop the public being “taken for a ride” on food and petrol prices.

The prime minister pledged to do “whatever I can” to “take a little bit of pressure down” after hearing voters talk about “how tough life was” on the doorstep.

It comes after Mr Burnham began his tenure in Downing Street with a spate of measures aimed at reducing costs, including a cut in VAT on energy bills and reduced business rates for pubs.

“People on whose doors I was knocking, only about five, six weeks ago, they did get over to me how tough life was,” he told the *Mirror*. “Can’t go for drink any more. Can’t take the kids out. Not having a holiday this year.

“I heard those type of things being said throughout the campaign, and those comments were still ringing in my ears as I arrived in Downing Street.”

The prime minister said “outrageously” high rail fares were “in my sights”, but added he would not give people “false promises”.

John Healey said, ‘we can’t completely stop the squeeze’ on families and businesses *(PA)*

“It’s about looking across the piece,” he said. “Not giving people false promises, but being honest with them and saying, ‘Well, I’ll do whatever I can in all of these different areas just to take a little bit of pressure down’.”

Meanwhile, chancellor John Healey said he would be “watching closely” to protect the public from “price gouging” at the petrol pump and in supermarkets as the war in Iran continues to hit prices.

Mr Healey conceded that “we can’t completely stop the squeeze” on families and businesses amid Mr Burnham’s efforts to show he will focus on tackling the cost of living since taking office.

However, he signalled he would be ready to intervene to protect consumers from unfair price rises at home.

“We’ll be watching closely for any suggestions that customers are being taken for a ride at the pump or the till,” Mr Healey wrote in *The Telegraph*.

“Companies’ willingness to work with the government throughout this crisis has been positive, and there has been no significant evidence of so-called price gouging, but I want to be blunt in reassuring the public that our regulators have the powers to clamp down on it if it happens.”

The start of Mr Burnham’s premiership has seen him announce a succession of measures aimed at alleviating cost of living pressures, such as a cut in VAT on energy bills and capping bus fares at £2 throughout 2027.

The measures Mr Burnham has unveiled, including an expansion of technical training in schools, are likely to require additional spending.

Mr Healey promised that his first Budget would be “built on fiscal discipline” as he revealed that it would take place on 28 October.

He and the prime minister have written to the cabinet to make clear there is no new money coming for the fresh pledges, he told *The Times*.

Departments need to be ready to “shift funding away from unproductive or legacy programmes that no longer reflect this administration’s priorities”, he wrote in the letter.

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People are ‘right to worry’ about new tech, says AI minister

But Kanishka Narayan is tasked by PM with ensuring technology ‘makes people’s lives better’

Athena Stavrou Political Reporter

A new AI Taskforce is being led by Kanishka Narayan *(Reuters)*

Britain’s first AI minister has said “people are right to worry” about the impact of technology on jobs, but vowed to “work every hour, every day to try to make sure it goes right”.

Kanishka Narayan became the country’s first minister for AI after Andy Burnham created the role in his Cabinet as he became prime minister last month.

A new AI Taskforce led by Mr Narayan has also been created, as the new prime minister promised to put AI “at the centre of all our work to change people’s lives for the better”.

Speaking to *The Times*, Mr Narayan, said Britain had "sat out the tech revolution" over the last 15 years, as he called for more investment in technology.

But addressing concerns about the impact of technological change, he said: "People are right to be worried.

"This is the most important question for, in some cases, our jobs, but in many cases for our kids' jobs and their kids' jobs. I'm not going to sit here and tell you it's going to be brilliant and we're all going to get through it smoothly. This is an unprecedented pace of technological jump."

Upon the launch of the AI Taskforce, Mr Narayan said AI would likely be the "most significant technology in human history".

He added that Britain could cut through the "slop of AI" to boost areas such as recruitment.

"If we get the job-matching and recruitment process right, we'll cut through not just the slop of AI, but frankly, the slop of recruitment," he said.

"I'm not guaranteeing that it's going to go the right way, but what I am guaranteeing is that I'm going to work every hour, every day to try to make sure it goes right."

Mr Burnham has recently raised concerns about the increasing use of artificial intelligence to screen potential candidates for jobs, questioning how young people without existing connections could get their foot in the door.

He added he did not feel that "recruitment in the post-pandemic era is becoming fairer".

He also called on employers to reconsider their reliance on virtual job interviews, arguing the technology may not give young people the ability to "shine" during the hiring process.

"One thing I really don't like is this culture now of interviewing via Zoom or Teams," he said. "That just doesn't seem right to me.

I know it’s convenient for the organisations that do it, but how does a young person shine in that situation?”

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At least five Fayed survivors are victims of human trafficking

Women who suffered sexual abuse get official recognition from Home Office

Athena Stavrou Political Reporter

More than 150 women have told the police they were abused by Mohamed al-Fayed *(PA Archive)*

At least five survivors of sexual abuse at the hands of Harrods owner Mohamed al-Fayed are victims of human trafficking, the Home Office has confirmed.

The survivors, whose experiences include both international and domestic trafficking, have received conclusive grounds decisions from the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), the UK's official framework for identifying victims of modern slavery, including human trafficking, forced labour and servitude.

Once a potential victim is referred to the NRM, the Single Competent Authority (SCA), which is part of the Home Office, processes the referral and decides on whether to officially recognise the individual as a modern slavery victim.

On 29 April 2026, it was reported by the BBC that one victim had received a positive conclusive grounds decision, after reporting abuse suffered at the hands of Mohamed al-Fayed and his brother, Salah.

Since then, all four members of an advocacy group for Fayed survivors called No One Above have also received conclusive grounds decisions that they are victims of modern slavery: Justine, Elizabeth, Margo and Isabella, all pseudonyms.

While these four have been confirmed by the Press Association (PA), it is understood that there are more survivors who have also received positive conclusive grounds decisions.

Their cases date back as early as the Nineties, while the most recent incidents took place after the 2010 sale of Harrods.

One survivor told PA they were recruited to a false role within Harrods, while two were hired for a legitimate role and then selected for abuse off the shop floor.

Many of Fayed’s victims had worked at his Harrods department store in Knightsbridge, central London *(PA)*

Another survivor was employed as a domestic worker for Fayed after being recruited via a letting agency called Hyde Park Residence. All five survivors were referred to the NRM by the charity Unseen UK.

This reporting framework allows victims to receive appropriate support and provides the government with vital data about modern slavery in the UK.

Justine worked at Harrods for more than three years in the Nineties, and was trafficked and abused during this time. She told PA she felt “shell-shocked” when she received the conclusive grounds decision in June that she had been a victim of modern slavery.

Justine said: “It’s not something I realised was happening to me at the time, so it’s all part of this journey that we’re on now in reliving this experience, and actually really understanding what happened to us, which is very difficult. But it’s a really significant thing, getting that decision, seeing it in writing that you were a victim of modern slavery and trafficking is very… it’s really shocking to read.”

Justine told PA that this is “concrete confirmation” from the Home Office that Fayed survivors were victims of human trafficking and that the scope of experiences was wide: from domestic to international trafficking, from those who worked at Harrods to those not involved with Harrods at all.

She said this is “very significant”, because Harrods’ position has been that the abuse was just the actions of “one bad man”, and that there is nothing they can do now he is dead. These decisions illustrate that that is not the case at all.

Elizabeth was also a Harrods employee and received a conclusive grounds decision that she was a victim of modern slavery in May. She told PA that all the survivors in the Fayed case are victims of human trafficking, because it was all one system that recruited, exploited and silenced victims.

She said: “Everybody connected with this case is a trafficking victim, because it was all one system. You can’t say that victim A wasn’t trafficked and victim B was. I think there’s this persistent misunderstanding, possibly within the Metropolitan Police themselves, which is scary, that trafficking only involves being moved across international borders.

“There have been positive conclusive grounds trafficking decisions in cases where the trafficking occurred within the Harrods building.”

‘Everywhere he went, he had enablers,’ said one Fayed victim *(PA)*

Margo was a domestic worker for Fayed after the sale of Harrods, and was recruited via a letting agency called Hyde Park Residence. She received a positive conclusive grounds decision that she was a victim of human trafficking in July.

Margo told PA that she had not felt like a victim of trafficking “because really I didn’t know what trafficking was, especially domestic trafficking”.

She said Fayed’s trafficking network went “so beyond Harrods”.

“This was Balnagown [a Scottish property], it was Saint-Tropez, it was Fayair [a private jet company], it was Fulham Football

Club, it was Hyde Park Residence. Everywhere he went he had enablers, and everywhere he went he had the capacity to abuse. All of his residences, all of his businesses."

Margo said she did not originally come forward because she did not work at Harrods.

She said: "There has just been so much emphasis put on Harrods to the point where I believe that there are so many more victims that haven't come forward because they believe that it's solely a Harrods issue.

"I know of one other Hyde Park Residence victim, but there has to be hundreds more somewhere."

Isabella worked in the chairman's office at Harrods in 2001. She received her conclusive grounds decision that she was a victim of trafficking in May.

She told PA: "I think one thing that the public doesn't understand is they think this was one bad man, but he couldn't have done what he did without Harrods processing women to him and silencing them afterwards.

"And it wasn't just Harrods, obviously. It was any entity that Al Fayed owned or had control of. It was his yachts, his aviation business, the Ritz Paris, his properties all over France and Monaco, it went as far as the States and the UAE – anywhere that man touched."

It was not just Mohamed Fayed either, she said, but "a wider network of perpetrators".

Isabella added: "We are not aware of any negative decisions in this case, and there have now been many self-initiated referrals through Unseen."

More than 400 allegations of sexual misconduct have been made against Fayed, dating between 1977 and 2014, including sexual assault, rape, sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

The Met Police are investigating at least 156 victims who contacted them directly, including 21 who came forward before Fayed died in 2023 at the age of 94.

The investigation, known as Operation Cornpoppy, is looking at people who may have facilitated or enabled Fayed's crimes. Four people have been questioned to date, 19 months after the investigation opened.

The Home Office has been approached for comment.

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Schools turn to lockable pouches to keep students off their phones

Some teachers say pouches are a game-changer and are making children happier. Others claim they are a waste of money

Nicole Wootton-Cane

YONDR
YONDR

Pouches such as those made by Yondr are being used in schools across the country *(AFP/Getty)*

When headteacher Sarah Capewell joined Stockport Grammar School in 2023, the school was struggling with how to keep children off their smartphones.

They had implemented a “No See No Hear” policy, which allowed children to have their phones with them in school provided they were switched off and not used. But Ms Capewell quickly realised this wasn’t working.

“We’d have behavioural incidents where a photo or a video had been taken in school and then we would be dealing with the consequences of that, or we'd see groups of children gathering in the toilets but they'd come from different lessons and they somehow all knew to go to the same place at the same time," she said.

"So we could see there were signs of things going on. It became an ongoing issue for teachers always having to be on the lookout for these things."

Last month, the government made it mandatory for schools to enforce a smartphone-free policy. Schools across the country have introduced lockable pouches from companies such as Yondr as a requirement, and in June, Thames Valley's Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) announced £255,000 worth of funding, seized from criminal activity, to go towards keeping schools phone-free.

Some insist the pouches have transformed their school environment. But other teachers are concerned they are a distraction from the wider problem of whether smartphones are suitable for children at all.

Yondr's own research on the matter is mixed. It publicly boasts about the positive findings, that pouches reduce phone use in schools, but buries the researcher's findings that there was no meaningful change in test scores, attendance, classroom attention, and perceived online bullying.

At Stockport Grammar, Ms Capewell decided to introduce mandatory Yondr pouches in September 2025, giving one to every pupil. She said the results have been "overwhelmingly positive".

The government has told schools they must have a phone-free policy *(PA)*

At the same time, staff continued conversations with parents about supporting children to navigate the online world and whether giving their child a smartphone is the right option for them.

She said the results have been “genuinely incredible”, with teachers reporting a “huge” change in the atmosphere around the school in an internal survey.

“Teachers said that pupils were more focused in lessons because they hadn’t got that phone in their pocket, and also they saw a decrease in the number of children asking to go to the toilet in lessons,” she explained.

Even pupils, who were understandably “a bit more reluctant at first”, have come to accept the change and even admit that it helps them focus, Ms Capewell said.

“For us, the cost of these pouches was worth the investment because it was about pupil wellbeing.”

But Guy Holder, a teacher in southwest London, is sceptical that phone pouches are making any real difference. He told *The Independent* that while they can provide an “inconvenience” for pupils looking to get on their devices during school hours, they "do nothing" to prevent harm beyond the school gates.

He is calling for an "urgent pause" on the rollout of pouches, which he says is close to becoming a nationwide policy that has faced "no scrutiny and no questions".

"The government has moved the guidance to a statutory footing, and so schools are panicking," he said. "We need to stop and think."

Police and crime commissioner Matthew Barber is using £255,000 of funds seized from criminals to help schools go phone-free *(Thames Valley Police)*

One of his main criticisms is that pouches do not stop children using phones outside of school, nor do they encourage a conversation around when children should get smartphones. Instead, he says, they accept the status quo that children will bring smartphones to school, and "do nothing to address the fundamental issues" such as harmful online content and addiction issues.

Also of concern to Mr Holder is their cost. Schools usually pay around £20 to £25 per pouch, which is sometimes funded by the school and sometimes a requirement placed on the parent.

For him, this is a “scandalous” use of precious funds that could have been spent elsewhere.

Instead, he believes schools should be implementing brickphone-only policies, while asking students to keep phones out of sight and earshot during school hours. “Not only are schools paying for the pouches, but teachers actually have to make the pouch system work,” he said. “They need to check it is actually their phone, not a dummy phone, that has gone in the pouch. Then they have to do spot checks on the pouches during the day.

“Then you’ve also got the issue of kids trying to break the pouches. So in other words, the pouch system only really works if the teachers are really working hard to enforce it, which they can do with a No See No Hear policy.”

Thames Valley’s Police and Crime Commissioner, Matthew Barber, told *The Independent* teachers have described to him being filmed while trying to discipline children and spending “a lot of time” in confrontation with pupils over phones.

He added it is important to be clear that Proceeds Of Crime Act (POCA) funding is not “public money” but that legislation states it must be used for a “charitable purpose”. POCA legislation allows money seized from criminal activity to be redistributed into the community.

“I don’t claim to have the empirical evidence that (removing phones) increases grades,” he said. “But what I think it does is remove what is not just a significant distraction, but a disruption within lessons.”

He said he recognises removing phones from the classroom is not a “panacea”, but that having a “big chunk of the day” when a child can’t be online can help prevent offending.

“There’s a reduced opportunity for children to commit and be victims of crimes,” he said.

“I don’t think there should be anything exceptional about saying we want these classrooms to be a safe, sensible, and controlled space.”

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Man arrested after Briton's body is found in suitcase in Athens

Elisabeth-Jane Ross, 38, was found dead in a derelict building on 18 July

Neil Pooran

Elisabeth-Jane Ross had travelled to Greece to see friends *(Supplied)*

A 26-year-old man has been arrested following the death of a Scottish woman whose body was found inside a suitcase in Athens.

The body of Elisabeth-Jane Ross, 28, was discovered by a homeless man in a derelict building in the Kypseli area of Athens on 18 July.

She is believed to have died between five and seven days before she was found, though someone was reportedly using her mobile phone to send messages purporting to be from her.

The Hellenic Police, Greece's national force, were able to identify the victim using fingerprints.

Ross, who is understood to be from Edinburgh, entered Greece on 26 June and was initially staying with friends in Piraeus.

She is then said to have gone to meet with American friends in another part of the Greek capital, but it is unclear if this ever happened.

ARE WE GOING TO JUST WAIT AND WATCH THEM ALL DIE?

An abandoned building where the body was found in a suitcase *(Reuters)*

The Hellenic Police said they analysed video footage to identify the suspect, who confessed on Thursday.

The 26-year-old man, who is a foreigner, is believed to have put her body into a suitcase, taking it to the abandoned site where it was found.

In the following days, he is said to have used her bank card to withdraw money.

A replica pistol and a knife were found at the suspect's home and police have filed a case against him for manslaughter, robbery and violation of weapons laws.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office said earlier: “Our thoughts are with Elisabeth’s family during this difficult time.

“We are providing consular support and are in contact with the local authorities.”

A Police Scotland spokesperson said: “We are aware of the death of a Scottish woman in Athens and are liaising with authorities in Greece.

“Officers are providing support to her family in Scotland.”

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Greenwich and Kent merge to create the UK’s first ‘super-university’

London and South East University Group has four campuses across London, Medway and Kent

Ellie Ng

The new London and South East University Group, to be known as LASE, has more than 50,000 students

The Universities of Kent and Greenwich have merged to create what they describe as the UK’s first ”super-university”.

The new London and South East University Group, to be known as LASE, has more than 50,000 students and four campuses across London, Medway and Kent, and has become the third largest university in the UK.

The two universities will still operate as distinct academic divisions within the university group, retaining their current names. Students will still apply to and graduate from the institution that they pick.

The higher education institutions announced plans to merge in September last year. The official launch will take place on 7 September, exactly one year on.

The universities of Greenwich and Kent said that their merged group will provide a strong financial foundation *(University of Greenwich/PA)*

It comes as universities in the UK have been facing increasing financial pressures, with MPs on the Education Committee warning earlier this year that there is a “real risk” a university in England could close due to insolvency for the first time.

The Office for Students (OfS), the higher education regulator in England, told the committee that it fears 24 providers are at risk of becoming insolvent and closing in the 12 months from November last year, and warned 45 per cent of higher education providers could be facing a deficit for 2025/26.

The universities of Greenwich and Kent said previously that their merged group will provide a strong financial foundation for getting through economic challenges and would be a “blueprint for others to follow”. In May, King’s College London and Cranfield University, based in Bedford, announced plans to merge in August 2027.

University of Greenwich vice-chancellor and new chief executive of LASE Professor Jane Harrington said: “There has been tireless work over the last year working to an ambitious timetable and developing a new university model that has never been done before. It means we are starting with a smooth transition, an extremely strong senior executive team and clear direction so that we can fulfil our potential as the UK’s first super-university.”

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Pictures of the Day

Sumo much fun

Elementary school sumo wrestlers compete in the ring at the Wanpaku sumo wrestling tournament in Tokyo, Japan. *Reuters*

Tulip
BALLOONS

Higher calling

Hot air balloons fly during the 7th International Cappadocia Balloon Festival in Göreme, Nevsehir province, Turkey. *Reuters*

Fur protection

A woman shields a dog carried in a backpack from the sun during a heatwave, in the Vatican. *AFP/Getty*

Eye on the prize

Italy’s Filippo Pelati and Lucrezia Ruggiero perform during the mixed duet technical final. *Reuters*

Suit yourself

A man rides on his electric suitcase in Beijing. *AFP/Getty*

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Home news in brief

The Culture Club singer Boy George has faced a backlash over a song defending Israeli military action *(Getty)*

Boy George splits from manager over Israel song

Boy George has announced that he has split from his record label manager who wanted "nothing to do" with his new pro-Israel track. The Culture Club singer sparked a backlash last week after releasing a song, titled "We Will Dance Again", which defends Israel's military action in Palestine and refutes the idea that a genocide is being carried out in Gaza.

On Saturday, Boy George revealed that he had quit the role of King Herod in *Jesus Christ Superstar* over the controversy, and the fallout continues, with the singer cutting ties with his record label manager. Taking to X (Twitter), Boy George wrote: "In Buddhism we understand that every action comes with a consequence. Due to my decision to stand up for my Jewish friends I am losing a few people from my life.

"Today I parted company with Tony Pontius who has run my record label BGP for a number of years. I wanted to release 'We Will Dance Again' but he was unequivocal and said 'I want nothing to do with this song' and I responded 'ok, we are done'."

The song is currently unavailable on streaming services, with Boy George telling fans to purchase it on music distributor Bandcamp. "Not everyone's happy with it. I will be re-recording the song myself in the next few days and singing it very proudly," he said, before adding: "Fuck the haters." In September, the United Nations declared that Israel had committed genocide in Gaza following a two-year investigation.

Boozy MPs 'having their stomachs pumped'

Some MPs are drinking so much in parliament they are having their stomachs pumped, with alcohol "deeply embedded" in Westminster culture, a report has warned. Alcohol is freely available all day within Westminster and drinking is commonplace, according to the Institute of Alcohol Studies.

Authors of the report warned the drinking culture is causing "real, measurable harm" and that there is "no clear route to address it" after surveying MPs about the issue. In the survey of 190 MPs and their staff, nearly 10 per cent of respondents described a negative experience due to someone else's drinking at work. The most common were unwanted sexual attention and harassment, insults or humiliation.

Younger staff face additional risks due to "ingrained power dynamics and increased peer pressure to drink alcohol", the report added. It comes amid rising concerns over drinking in Westminster and a string of incidents that included a parliamentary researcher allegedly having her drink spiked at parliament's infamous Strangers' Bar.

Green Party MP for Gorton and Denton, Hannah Spencer, criticised Westminster's drinking culture in April this year, calling it "unprofessional and worrying", and accusing some MPs of drinking before voting. A parliament spokesperson said: "Any changes to parliament's provision of alcohol would ultimately be a matter for Members to decide on."

I lost out on roles due to height, says Waddingham

Actor Hannah Waddingham has revealed that she was repeatedly rejected for roles early on in her career because of her height. The Emmy-winning *Ted Lasso* star naturally stands 5ft 11in tall and reaches 6ft 2in in heels. While that kind of stature is an advantage in some occupations, it apparently wasn't for many of the projects she auditioned for.

"I would constantly get, 'We'd love to use her, but we've already cast the man,'" Waddingham said in a new profile by *The New York Times*. "Why can't a woman who's 6 feet 2 inches have all the same vulnerabilities and misgivings about herself, wobble as much, as somebody who's 5 feet 2 inches?"

At this point in her career, her height is no longer seen as a drawback but rather an asset. In fact, her *Ted Lasso* co-star and co-creator Brendan Hunt told *The Times* that while "tall" was not part of her character Rebecca's original description, "'Tall' and, in certain shoes, often 'taller than the male lead' is like – that's awesome."

Elsewhere in the interview, Waddingham talked about resisting cosmetic surgery to maintain "full control of my face". She said that at 52, "I'm actually more confident, more settled", adding: "So why would I want to make myself look like I'm 30, when I wasn't as happy at 30?" *Ted Lasso* season four premieres on 5 August on Apple TV+.

Centenarian, 105, reveals her secret to a long life

A centenarian has marked her 105th birthday in remarkable style by receiving 105 cards from across the globe. Mary Davidson Smith, a resident at Care UK's Murrayside care home in Edinburgh, expressed having a "wonderful time" reading the well-wishes, which arrived following an appeal by the home.

Cards travelled from as far afield as Singapore for her July celebration. Ms Smith also holds the rare distinction of receiving a card from King Charles, having previously received one from the late Queen Elizabeth. She celebrated her milestone with a "wonderful family day" and enjoyed afternoon tea with friends at Murrayside.

Born in Korea, Ms Smith lived internationally during her youth, including periods in England, Canada and the US. She later joined the Royal Navy and met her future husband, British army officer Charles Wynard Davidson Smith, while posted in Washington DC. They went on to live in Edinburgh where they raised two sons, Neil and Mark. Ms Smith now has four grandchildren.

She has already made plans for her 106th birthday and hopes to celebrate with a "good strong whisky", she said. Asked for her secret to a long and happy life, she said: "I enjoy it – keep on going." Ms Smith also said she came from a "long line of others that have lived long lives". *PA*

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Inside the camp in Italy helping Ukraine's traumatised children

The war has upended normal life for hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian children, with many seeing their homes destroyed. The No Sirens camp, run by the Hope for Ukraine organisation, tells **Alex Croft** that they aim to help restore the joy of childhood that has been lost

The Ukrainian children have finally enjoyed time away from the air raid sirens *(Photos Hope for Ukraine)*

The thunderous explosions of Russian Grad rocket launchers, staccato blasts of approaching gunfire, and the screeching whirr of air raid sirens have been the soundtrack to Yevhen and Vlad's childhoods during four years of war in Ukraine.

Both teenagers have suffered immensely as a result of Russia's invasion, recalling to *The Independent* their grim personal anecdotes including a civilian minibus torn to shreds by Russian gunfire, the kidnapping of family members, and the destruction of their home towns.

Now, for the first time since 2022, the 17-year-olds no longer need fear the sound of a passing aircraft, tucked safely away in the Italian coastal town of Lignano Pineta alongside 30 others, for a camp aimed at alleviating the psychological toll of war for Ukrainian children.

The boys say that the "No Sirens" camp, run by Hope for Ukraine, means everything to them. "Here I feel safe," says Vlad. "I go to bed peacefully, knowing that I will wake up the next morning. I hear airplanes in the sky, but they are ordinary passenger planes. They are not frightening."

But they know these rare weeks of bliss will not last. When they go back, Yevhen makes clear, "the reality of the war will still be there". It is a traumatising reality that has produced scarring memories for many young children.

Yevhen recalls one especially bleak night during their escape from Russian-occupied territory, as they queued to exit a checkpoint manned by Russian troops. A man had attempted to drive through the checkpoint without waiting, before soldiers opened fire at his vehicle.

"I remember waking up because of gunfire," Yevhen recalls. "The next morning, we saw his minibus completely riddled with bullets and covered in blood. He and the people with him had been shot after trying to pass the checkpoint without waiting in line. Seeing that was one of the most terrifying moments of my life."

Yevhen recalled brutal tales from his escape from parts of Russian-occupied Ukraine

Vlad, meanwhile, was forced to flee with his family from Orikhiv, in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region, and has since witnessed its destruction by Russian forces from afar.

"It is shelled every single day with guided aerial bombs, artillery, and drones," he says. "Recently, a three-ton bomb was dropped on the town. My home was destroyed, and there is almost nothing left of it."

Hailing from the frontline regions, Yevhen and Vlad are among a large group of teenagers taken on the 10-day retreat to Italy by charity Hope for Ukraine, where they have visited Venice, spent time on the beach, played with their peers, and most importantly, escaped the ever-present threat of Russian attacks.

Organisers say the camp is vital for giving the children back their childhood.

Yevhen, middle, and Vlad, right, on a boat during their holiday to Italy

They are often quiet and withdrawn when they arrive, some struggling to make friends when they arrive, to freely express their emotions, or to relax around a group of strangers. Those who come from near the frontline often arrive emotionally overwhelmed.

The children are also highly sensitive to loud sounds, says programme coordinator Ruslana. “Even something as natural as thunder during a storm can trigger fear and anxiety,” she says, recalling one night when a nearby storm “brought back memories of explosions and air raid sirens”.

But it takes just days before organisers say they begin to see changes in the children.

Anastasiia, an organiser hailing from the Russian-occupied city of Melitopol who now works with children in Kyiv, says: “They start smiling, talking to one another, taking part in creative activities, and behaving like children again.”

Anastasiia, who runs one of the art programmes, said children often struggle to make friends at the start

Days after it began, Yevhen, who comes from Henichesk in Ukraine’s war-ridden Kherson region, was already speaking glowingly of the camp in an interview with *The Independent*.

“I really don’t want to leave this camp yet because I truly like being here,” he says. “Here there are no air raid sirens. Everything feels peaceful and calm. I have friends to spend time with, and I can simply enjoy being a teenager without constantly worrying about what might happen next. Returning home is difficult to think about. I know that when I go back, the reality of the war will still be there.”

Vlad says that for the first time in years, he feels safe. “I go to bed peacefully, knowing that I will wake up the next morning. I hear airplanes in the sky, but they are ordinary passenger planes. They are not frightening.

Hope for Ukraine is running several camps over the summer

“In Ukraine, every loud sound can mean danger,” he continues. “The sound of an airplane, a helicopter, a missile, or a drone immediately makes you think about another attack. You never know when an air raid siren will begin or when missiles or drones might be flying toward your city. Living with that uncertainty every day is exhausting.”

Choosing which children join the camp is, for the organisers, the toughest part of the job. Children deemed to have suffered the most are prioritised, including those who have lost their homes, whose parents are serving on the frontline or have been killed, and those struggling with serious financial hardship. Yevhen and Vlad were clear choices.

“The war has changed my life completely,” says the former. “We had to leave our home behind, and now we don’t even know if we will ever be able to return. Our house in occupied territory has lost almost all of its value, and everything about our future feels uncertain.”

After 10 days in Italy, the children have now returned to their war-torn homes

Yevhen also recalls the kidnapping of his uncle, Hennadii, a Ukrainian journalist captured in occupied Henichesk in 2022. His family are aware that he has been beaten and tortured, and can only hope that he will be part of one of the ongoing future prisoner exchanges between Moscow and Kyiv.

Vlad says he joined the camp “because I wanted to feel safe again”.

“I wanted to experience peace, freedom, and a chance to forget about the war, even if only for a short time,” he adds. “That is why this camp has been so important to me. It has given me a chance to experience what it feels like to live without fear, even if only for a little while.”

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Migrants say Ceuta was 'like a prison' as thousands return to Morocco

Man says he survived for three days on water alone due to high food prices in Spanish exclave

Corina Pons

The Spanish Guardia Civil detains a migrant amid mass crossings from Morocco into Ceuta *(Reuters)*

Thousands of migrants who entered Spain's North African enclave of Ceuta from Morocco are now returning home – their hopes of a new life in Europe quickly crushed.

Many cited hunger, exhaustion and hostility from locals as reasons for their departure after crossing the heavily guarded border last week.

More than 60 people are now reported to have died after around 60,000 crossed into the Spanish territory on Thursday in extraordinary scenes.

Those heading back said they had initially been drawn by viral social media videos and messages from friends suggesting the border could be breached. Yet upon reaching Ceuta, many found no viable way to continue their journey to mainland Spain.

“We came to make progress, not to be fooled,” said Brahim, a bakery worker from Fez who left his job and crossed the border after watching clips of thousands doing the same. “I thought I’d build a better future there. But I was surprised in Ceuta.”

Brahim said he survived for three days on water alone and could not afford the high food prices on the Spanish side. “How come a tuna sandwich was being sold for 100 dirhams (£7.95)?”

Migrants walk towards the Fnideq region in northern Morocco after leaving Ceuta *(AFP/Getty)*

In Fnideq, the Moroccan city opposite Ceuta, Reuters saw nearly empty streets leading to the border crossing – a stark contrast to the thousands who had gathered there on Thursday.

Young men walked away from the frontier along the highway or waited for taxis to leave Fnideq, where shops have also been closed for days.

The returnees’ accounts included repeated complaints of shuttered supermarkets and shops, leaving them searching for food and water while their soaked clothes dried on the streets.

“Ceuta was like a prison – nothing to do there. Everything was closed,” said a worker at Morocco’s Tanger Med port, who declined to give his name because he was due back at work.

Some migrants also accused residents of Principe, a predominantly Moroccan neighbourhood in Ceuta, of attacking or driving them out. Reuters could not verify these accounts.

Moroccan waiter Yassine Ichou described being hit and chased away from Principe. “They imposed a siege to force us to leave Ceuta by ourselves. They succeeded in their plan,” he added, referring to the widespread shop closures.

Spain’s Interior Ministry said two people sustained minor injuries from knife attacks in two separate incidents and police had arrested one of the assailants. No deaths from knife attacks had been recorded in Ceuta since Thursday, it added.

Tens of thousands of migrants crossed the border from Morocco into Ceuta *(Reuters)*

Rachid, a worker at a Fnideq hotel near the crossing, said all six of its kitchen staff had left for Ceuta during the height of the influx and none had returned, forcing management to search for replacements.

Across the border in Ceuta, cafes reopened and customers flocked in as the city gradually returned to normal life. Most shops remained closed, while patrol cars moved through the streets in a visible show of security.

“We’ve taken the initiative to open because, ultimately, life has to return to its normal rhythm, but our safety and that of our staff always comes first,” said Marina Castano, 24, whose parents own two cafes in the centre.

Some residents said the situation on the outskirts was still tense. An aid worker at a migrant reception centre said it was full and unable to take in more people, estimating that thousands remained in the enclave.

Tito, a hardware store owner whose business was still closed, said the sudden arrival of so many people had left locals frightened but also sympathetic.

“You feel overwhelmed and, at the same time, helpless,” he said. “Those young people, they’re being completely exploited. They’re being used as bargaining chips.”

Mohamed Ahmed, a 43-year-old Sudanese man, said a truck dropped him and other migrants near the border, and he then swam for four hours to reach Ceuta.

He said police were blocking them from taking the road to a migration centre, but he remained determined to stay in Spain, adding: “I’m not going back. I’d rather die trying here.”

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World news in brief

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Vincent Pastore is best known for his portrayal of Salvatore 'Big Pussy' Bonpensiero in 'The Sopranos' *(Getty)*

Sopranos star Pastore dies aged 80

Vincent Pastore, best known for playing Salvatore "Big Pussy" Bonpensiero on *The Sopranos*, has died. He was 80. The star was reportedly found dead on Saturday in his Bronx, New York home, by a neighbour after he had not been seen or heard from in the past three days. An investigation has been launched into the circumstances of his death, *Deadline* reported.

In a statement to *The Independent*, his agent Bob McGowen said he only found out about Pastore's death on Saturday morning. Remembering him as "such a great guy" who would help anyone, McGowen added: "I am just so sad of this passing. It's hard to believe. I just spoke to him a couple [of] days ago."

Pastore was born on 14 July 1946, in the Bronx to an Italian-American family. After graduating from New Rochelle High School in 1964, he enlisted in the US Navy during the Vietnam

War. After three years of service, Pastore studied drama at Pace University but left before graduating because he struggled to find acting work. He instead turned to the nightclub business, going on to own the now-defunct rock club and bar Crazy Horse in New Rochelle. He eventually made his professional acting debut in Nancy Savoca's *True Love* (1989), starring Annabella Sciorra and Ron Eldard. It was his performance in the romcom that led casting director Ellen Lewis to hire him for a small, uncredited part in Martin Scorsese's classic *Goodfellas*.

Dozens injured after 4.7 earthquake jolts Naples

A magnitude 4.7 earthquake struck the Campi Flegrei area near Naples, southern Italy, leaving dozens injured, causing power outages, disrupting train and metro services, and damaging some buildings. At least 26 people were injured, according to Italian media.

About 300 people evacuated from their homes after the quake triggered landslides near the Phlegraean Fields, a large volcanic area west of Naples. Italy's civil protection minister, Nello Musumeci, urged caution and warned that the volcanic activity was not yet over. At least five of those injured were taken to hospital, and many residents spent the night on the streets, afraid their buildings would be damaged or collapse.

The tremor, recorded at 7.46pm (5.46pm GMT) on Friday, had its epicentre west of Naples, at a depth of about two miles, Italy's National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology said. Italian media reported it to be the strongest quake to hit the region in the last 40 years and caused part of a cliff and several unoccupied buildings to collapse. *Reuters*

US widens ban on Chinese imports

The United States has significantly expanded its ban on imports from Chinese companies, adding 43 more entities to a list targeting alleged human rights abuses against Uyghur and other minority groups. The move, announced on Friday, impacts supply chains ranging from electronics to food and metals. These companies have been placed on the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act Entity List.

This designation creates a legal presumption that any goods produced, wholly or in part, by these listed entities are made with forced labour and are therefore prohibited from entering the US, unless importers can definitively prove otherwise.

Beijing has consistently rejected accusations of forced labour and other abuses against Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities within the Xinjiang region. The notice, published by the US Department of Homeland Security, marks the first additions to the list under the Trump administration. *Reuters*

Arizona retirement village gets cannabis kiosk

An Arizona retirement community is getting a senior-focused cannabis kiosk, giving residents an easier way to purchase marijuana products without travelling to a dispensary. The cannabis brand Life Is Chill and cannabis technology company LoveBud will install the kiosk at Sun Lakes Country Club in Chandler on 19 August, allowing seniors to learn about and order cannabis products for home delivery, a spokesperson told *Marijuana Moment*.

The active-adult over-55 community has about 2,000 residents, with other amenities including an 18-hole executive golf course, heated pools and a community clubhouse. The kiosk will also be available to more than 12,000 residents in neighbouring sister communities, according to a news release.

The companies say the kiosk's “Easy Mode” was designed specifically for older adults, featuring large, easy-to-read navigation buttons, a simplified ordering process and a curated selection of cannabis products. The goal is to make purchasing marijuana more accessible for seniors who may not be comfortable using smartphone apps or navigating traditional online dispensary menus.

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Bumbling Burnham is crushing teens' dreams with his education overhaul

The new PM is essentially saying we have a choice between getting a pointless degree, becoming a tradesperson, or sitting and prompting AI, writes 14-year-old **Laila Manzoor**

Laila Manzoor: 'Andy Burnham isn't prepared to make the UK a culture capital' *(Sarfraz Manzoor)*

Please, prime minister… for the love of God, stop taking the wonder out of kids' lives.

At 14, my friends and I still believe, deep down, that we could be pop stars or top models. His announcement this week that practical skills will be brought back to schools is great for pupils who thrive in non-academic subjects, but is another hammer blow for those of us who love the arts.

One of my friends is an incredible artist – she's ridiculously talented and is studying at the BRIT School. But why bother? The small cafes near me put up AI posters that all look the same but don't cost anything to make. Nobody can really afford coffee any more, so cafes can't afford graphic designers.

Another friend loves music. Her dad and brother are in bands, and she just knows that's what she's here for. But the music industry is changing at breakneck speed. Labels don't have objective power over consumers any more. Viral songs don't even correlate to streams. Massive artists like Post Malone and Zayn have cancelled shows due to low ticket sales.

I want to be a writer, so I try to block all of that out. I'm not ready to give up my dreams, and Andy Burnham needs to understand that I'm not alone in this.

Our new PM, with his air of a bumbling, kindly dad, is seen as a half-formed rebel. He is a beacon of hope, a man of the people (and every other cliche that undermines my literary goals).

I don't want our educational system to stay the same, and I don't know anyone who does. A major overhaul is well overdue. Maybe, instead of thrusting a hard hat in everyone's direction, give university graduates a better jobs market instead?

> *When what you've tied your identity to has little to no value, you as a person feel like you have little to no value*

As a girl, I dreamed of riding unicorns, being a fairy, and writing lots of books. I did not dream that, at 14, I would be flung into a painful conundrum. Burnham is essentially suggesting that we have a choice between getting a pointless degree, becoming a tradesperson, or sitting and prompting AI. I agree that tradespeople deserve more respect – but give people who want to keep their graduation caps a better time of it, too.

I do not in any way, shape or form look down on tradespeople. In fact, I look up to them – like Serge, our window cleaner, on his very long ladder. But the arts are what I love. I could quite happily leave school and just write all day, but Burnham isn't prepared to make the UK a culture capital. He wants a stake in the tech wars.

The Liberal Democrats' education spokesperson, Munira Wilson, said it best: "We must not allow these changes to predetermine children's futures at just 14, baking in disadvantage." I really, truly don't want me or anyone my age to give up on doing what they love.

My friends are already scared of the world becoming a dystopian AI-unemployment-wildfire nightmare. We're not ready to let go of the perhaps-expired meritocratic ethos. Reading articles about people with degrees from good universities ending up stacking shelves or living with their parents is a shock. That's not how I thought it worked. That's not how it worked for my parents, or in the movies.

Under a recent BBC article about the youth unemployment crisis, the top comment, apparently from a small business owner, said: "We get CVs dropped in every week from graduates with irrelevant degrees who can't get jobs. Learning a trade should be something to aspire to." Reading that, I wanted to throw my toys out of the pram.

When what you've tied your identity to has little to no value, you as a person feel like you have little to no value, too. My writing is my thing. I was called "the human thesaurus" at age nine, writing poems in a notebook at 10, and I've written a diary since I learned to write. I probably used a pen to teethe on.

I've been feeling as though I'm banging my head against a brick wall. I don't want to be stacking shelves or making coffees for much longer than the classic Saturday job. But now, my perspective on this is changing.

I have clean water, food and a bed – all for certain. I would be fine to live with my parents forever as long as I get to do what I love. (Don’t ask my parents what they think about this.) Didn’t Van Gogh only sell one painting during his lifetime? Edgar Allan Poe today would probably have had a man cave in his parents’ house while he wrote gothic fan fiction on AO3.

Life really is about your passions and what each person enjoys. I have to hope Burnham understands that enough so that, when my time comes, I can still pursue my dreams for real. It’s what makes society and our world.

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Voices

Has Zuckerberg lost control of AI?

The Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg has turned the tech giant into one of the biggest investors in artificial intelligence, says **James Moore**. But as billions pour into the race, shareholders are wondering whether he is building the future – or burning a fortune chasing it

Mark Zuckerberg's AI gamble could make or break Meta *(Reuters)*

There weren't many "likes" from Wall Street when Mark Zuckerberg unveiled Meta's quarterly results on Wednesday.

Investors appear increasingly unsure whether the 42-year-old co-founder, chairman and CEO of Meta Platforms and Facebook's latest gamble on artificial intelligence will confirm his genius and secure his trillion-dollar company's future… or turn out to be the most expensive bet in corporate history.

Meta’s core businesses – Facebook, Instagram and its advertising empire – remain formidable. Revenues of around $61bn in the second quarter beat expectations, the sort of performance that would once have guaranteed investor applause. But these are not normal times at Meta.

The company is no longer being judged simply as a social media giant. It is being judged as an AI company. And shareholders are asking whether Zuckerberg’s extraordinary spending spree – investing hundreds of billions into artificial intelligence that can outperform humans – will create the next great technology platform or simply burn through mountains of cash.

The warning sign was free cash flow, the money left after paying for operations and investment. It collapsed to $784m in the latest quarter, compared with $8.5bn a year earlier. For a company once celebrated as one of the world’s greatest cash-generating machines, this marks a dramatic change. Meta is behaving less like a mature technology business and more like a start-up betting everything on a future that has not yet arrived.

Zuckerberg is spending billions on data centres, computing power and AI talent, in an attempt to compete with Google’s parent company, Alphabet, OpenAI, and the growing number of firms racing to dominate the next technological era.

OpenAI chief executive Sam Altman has been making a similar argument in Washington, warning lawmakers that the next generation of AI models will require vast investment in infrastructure, energy and computing power. The stakes could hardly be higher.

Zuckerberg’s fear is simple: Meta could become a victim of the next technological revolution. The company owns some of the most influential digital platforms ever created, but it remains dependent on operating systems and devices controlled by others.

Apple has already demonstrated the danger. Its privacy changes have restricted access to some advertising data and challenged Meta's ability to track users across the internet. For Zuckerberg, the lesson was obvious: it is risky building a global empire on somebody else's foundations. That helps explain why Meta has repeatedly searched for the next platform.

Its most famous attempt was the metaverse – the virtual universe where we were all supposed to wear headsets and interact through digital avatars. It consumed billions but failed to capture public enthusiasm. Now AI has replaced the metaverse as Zuckerberg's great strategic obsession.

> *How comfortable are you eating a chocolate bar on a bus when the person opposite wearing smart glasses may be quietly recording you? Technology companies have repeatedly underestimated the importance of trust*

Meta's AI-powered glasses offer more promise. Sales are rising, and wearable technology could eventually become the gateway to personal AI assistants. If smartphones defined the previous technological revolution, Zuckerberg believes glasses could define the next. But there is a problem. They are not iPhones.

Consumers may appreciate AI tools that make life easier, but they may be less enthusiastic about devices that make them feel constantly watched. How comfortable are you eating a chocolate bar on a bus when the person opposite wearing smart glasses may be quietly recording you? Technology companies have repeatedly underestimated the importance of trust.

The challenge for Meta is that the AI race is no longer confined to Silicon Valley. China's rapidly developing technology sector is also becoming a serious competitor, despite US attempts to restrict access to advanced chips and systems.

Zuckerberg has criticised some elements of Washington's approach, arguing that America should compete through innovation rather than relying solely on restrictions. He has also backed open-AI models, which developers can adapt and run themselves.

That position is intriguing coming from the boss of Meta, a company whose success has been built on controlling digital platforms and user networks. But it reflects the reality of AI: the winners may not simply be those with the biggest budgets, but those who attract the widest community of developers and users. Which raises the uncomfortable question: from what we know about Meta, what should worry us more – China's AI ambitions or Meta's?

Shares in AI chip companies such as Nvidia fell this week after it was revealed that China's homegrown giants had made technological breakthroughs that could lower prices and end global hardware-manufacturing monopolies.

This news came as the AI sector was still reeling from the revelation that an experimental next-gen version of ChatGPT, while undergoing testing, managed to access the internet and attack rival systems. These are not science-fiction fantasies, but reminders that increasingly powerful technologies can create risks their makers do not fully understand.

For investors, however, the calculation is simpler. Can Zuckerberg turn hundreds of billions of dollars of spending into a profitable advantage?

Some analysts believe he can. Meta has extraordinary strengths: billions of users, huge advertising revenues and the financial firepower to keep investing when others cannot. But scepticism is growing. The company that once delivered predictable profits is now asking shareholders to believe in a future built largely on promises. Zuckerberg's answer is to think bigger – much bigger.

He talks about AI "superintelligence", and personal assistants that could become constant companions, helping us organise our lives and answer our questions. It is an extraordinary vision. It is also one that raises another question: do we really want technology companies becoming the invisible managers of our daily existence?

Meta remains one of the great corporate success stories of the modern era. But the greatest winner of one technological revolution does not automatically dominate the next. The danger for Zuckerberg is not that Meta disappears. It is that it becomes yesterday's champion – the company that mastered social media but failed to control artificial intelligence.

The gamble is breathtaking. If he is right, Meta could become one of the defining companies of the AI age. If he is wrong, investors may wonder whether hundreds of billions of dollars were spent chasing a future that never arrived.

Hey Siri: can you point me to the exit?

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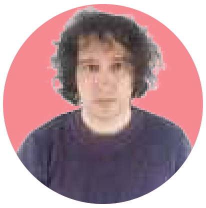
China is preparing for AI upheaval in ways the West can only dream of

From humanoid helpers to a ‘ban’ on AI companions and a radical overhaul of its education system, China is preparing its citizens for the future in a much more advanced way than the West. There are many lessons to be learnt, writes **Chris Stokel-Walker**



China’s humanoid robots are just one way in which the country is taking a different approach to the AI revolution than the Western world *(Social media)*

In January 2025, Chinese AI company DeepSeek caused the biggest single-day destruction of corporate value in Wall Street history. Its low-cost model prompted investors to question whether the AI boom really required so many expensive chips, wiping $593bn (£441bn) from Nvidia’s market value.

The "DeepSeek moment", as it was coined, was an early shock to the financial system. And the next earthquake came this week, when shares in memory chip maker CXMT rose 466 per cent on their Shanghai debut, making it one of China's most valuable listed companies in an instant.

That a relatively unknown company is now threatening the US's ranking as global leader in cutting-edge AI research has caused shockwaves through world markets. But this is not the only area the Chinese are racing ahead in the world of AI. Whether it is humanoid robots, an educational revolution, or even protecting its citizens from psychological harm by restricting AI companions, China's preparedness for what is coming appears more robust than that of the West. And Washington is spooked.

Apps
Classements
Toutes les apps
Apps gratuites
Apps payantes
1 DeepSeek - Assistant IA
Assistant IA Inte...
Obtenir
2 ChatGPT
Productivité
Ouvrir
3 Temu : Achats et Mode en Lig...
Les bons plans &...
4 Threads

On top: DeepSeek is setting a robust challenge for the US big-hitters *(AFP/Getty)*

At the World Artificial Intelligence Conference in Shanghai this month, Xi Jinping pitched China's open-source AI as a global public good and promised training, infrastructure and co-operation for developing countries – all at a lower price than the costly models produced by the likes of OpenAI, Anthropic and Google.

While open-source AI allows researchers, universities, healthcare providers and businesses in poorer countries to build local applications rather than relying on costly imported technology, it is also a smart strategic move. It extends its technological influence and helps promote Chinese technology standards and ecosystems internationally. And China is making some bold moves around the societal impact of AI.

Future-proofing

China is way ahead of the West when it comes to AI in the physical world and outside of a chat window. The International Federation of Robotics says China installed 295,000 industrial robots in 2024, more than half of all the new robots installed worldwide that year, and now has more than 2 million working in its factories. The aim is to maintain or increase productivity even as the working-age population declines, a problem of demographic decline that Western economies are still trying to wrestle with.

China's aim with its factory robots is to maintain or increase output as working-age populations decline *(Agibot)*

The rise of humanoid robots has so unnerved the Trump administration that it has banned new advanced models from entering the US, citing "unacceptable risks" to national security.

The move targets humanoid and four-legged robots, many of them made in China, America's main competitor in the race to develop super-intelligent robotics and AI.

While the US may be squeamish about Sinocentric robots, other countries may have fewer foibles: at the UN AI for Good summit in Geneva in early July, China's industry minister, Li Lecheng, described embodied AI – systems able to perceive, decide and act through robots – as moving "from labs to factories". China or Chinese companies had a disproportionately large presence on the convention hall floor and within its discussion rooms.

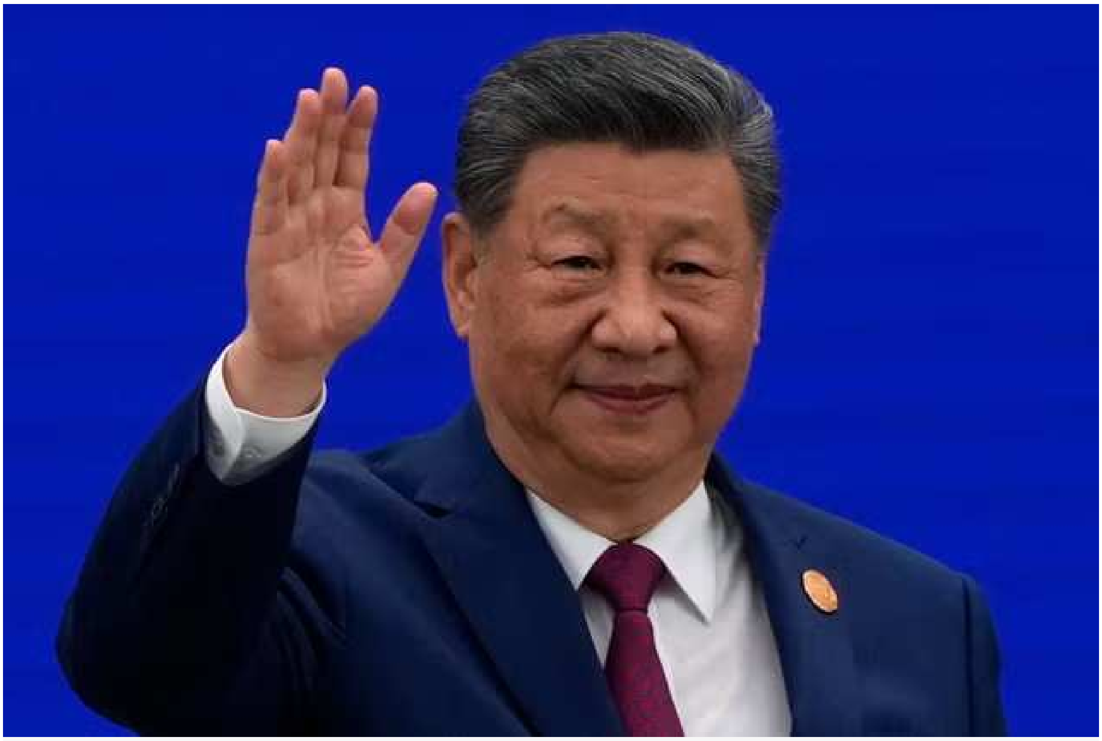
Responding to the needs of a changing world, China has also dramatically withdrawn or retooled the number of courses it offers students at university, pausing enrolment on 2,220 programmes and slashing another 1,428 entirely from its 62,800 undergraduate programmes in 2024. It also added 1,839 new programmes that year.

Those new courses are specialising in what China sees as the educational requirements of the future: AI, integrated circuits, the digital economy, biotechnology, new energy and other sectors Beijing sees as strategically important.

China can deploy education as a form of industrial policy in a way the more fragmented Western education system can't do. By preparing their young and reshaping their education at pace, they are ensuring that their citizens will be best placed to lead the economy of the future.

The state's hand can also be seen in how China's government allows its citizens to interact with AI. In mid-July, the country introduced rules that require companies providing AI companion chatbots to disclose that users are speaking to a machine, provide reminders that they are not talking to a human, and intervene when conversations suggest self-harm. This was all being done with the express intention to guard against psychological dependence and injury.

“This is really the China piece of an AI story, not an AI angle on a China story,” says Jeremy Daum, a senior research scholar at Yale Law School’s Paul Tsai China Center. Other countries are wrestling with the same risks, he says, and China’s approach is “prevention-heavy rather than punitive”.



Xi Jinping’s state has been heavy-handed when it comes to AI regulations, preventing certain aspects of the tech in a way they believe will benefit everyone *(Getty)*

While it isn’t a ban on AI partners per se, it does show how China is introducing protections for its people as it develops new and useful AI products. As tech companies lobby against excessive legislation in the US, China has taken the reverse approach and put it at its heart. And while this approach is, of course, designed to support broader government priorities, including content control, social stability and cybersecurity, the ultimate result of paying attention to standards, deployment and social consequences has been to create useful products that reduce the chance of psychological harm to its citizens.

China has also expressed concern about technologies that may encourage social withdrawal or emotional dependence, so these guardrails could have a further consequence by helping fix China’s low birth rate too.

Preparedness is everything

With the gap between the United States and China narrowing, and the latter putting in place a much more comprehensive package of policies around all aspects of the innovative technology, China increasingly looks like it is better prepared for the hard-fought contest in the months and years to come.

China's restrictions on AI companions are seen as 'prevention-heavy rather than punitive' as many across the globe struggle with loneliness and dependency *(Getty)*

China's intention to throw the weight of a nation behind robots has a precedent in electric vehicles. Chinese electric vehicles (EVs) are among the most AI-intensive cars on the market, and AI is central to how many Chinese automakers differentiate their vehicles. Chinese manufacturer BYD sold more than 4.6 million electric vehicles in 2025, while the International Energy Agency says Chinese EV exports doubled last year.

In markets outside Europe and the United States, imports from China supplied 55 per cent of electric-car sales – up from less than 5 per cent just five years earlier. And those cars have AI baked through them like a stick of Blackpool rock: the intelligent driving functions and advanced driver assistance systems act as a spur for AI development in China, helping keep its labs hyper-competitive with the US.

The last sprint in the AI race is to become competitive in hardware and foundation models, which is what seems to have sparked this week.

Chinese developers have released highly capable open-weight models – meaning AI systems whose parameters can be downloaded and adapted to personal tastes – through companies including Alibaba, DeepSeek, Zhipu and Moonshot AI.

Moonshot's new Kimi K3 model is a 2.8-trillion-parameter model with its full weights released publicly. While Kimi's own technical paper concedes it isn't as good as the most powerful proprietary American systems overall, the gap is closing.

> *The gap between the frontier on benchmarks and in domains that really matter – for example, cyber – is closing*
>
> Kristy Loke, research fellow at MATS

"It puts a lot of pressure on US AI companies and on the idea of not just American leadership in AI, but American dominance," says Kyle Chan, a fellow at the Brookings Institution's John L Thornton China Center. Kimi, GLM and Qwen models have arrived "in rapid succession", Chan says, recalling the first DeepSeek shock, when "a whole bunch of Chinese models" appeared to be narrowing the gap at once.

1:03
5G
Kimi instant
KIMI
K3
Ask anything

The Chinese Kimi chatbot isn't as powerful as ChatGPT – but its open-source design makes it much more flexible in use *(Reuters)*

America still holds a trump card in the form of computing power. Nvidia and other US companies design the accelerators used to train advanced AI, while American allies dominate the equipment required to manufacture them. But even that is slipping now. Export controls were meant to preserve that advantage by restricting China's access to the best chips. What it actually did was create adversity that encouraged Chinese companies to squeeze more from less and develop substitutes.

"The gap between the frontier on benchmarks and in domains that really matter – for example, cyber – is closing," says Kristy Loke, a research fellow at research lab MATS, who studies China's AI governance and innovation strategy. China's growing hard power comes from increasingly capable models and hardware, she says, while its soft power lies in offering those tools to other countries.

"The one superpower [the US] has is control over computer supply," says Loke. But China's response is about building "strategic or systemic resilience" that is able to absorb sanctions and supply shocks rather than remaining permanently dependent on foreign technology.

CXMT's rise is the poster child for that attitude. The company raised $8.6bn in Asia's largest initial public offering of 2026 and accounted for around 9 per cent of global DRAM memory chip shipments early this year.

That memory is vital to AI servers, smartphones and cars. CXMT is a world away from the scale of Nvidia, remaining smaller than competitors Samsung, SK Hynix and Micron, and specialising in memory chips that aren't useful for training the leading AI models. But the capabilities are increasing, and they could eventually do so.

"If China is able to solve this chip problem through engineering and energy, then in the long run I think it is a very competitive AI power," says Loke.

A long-term, state-led strategy that integrates industrial policy, workforce and people planning, and technological development is what makes it differ so markedly from the more market-driven approach in the United States.

It is one which might just have the winning edge in a world where there will be many losers.

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This Week in History

Explore how major events between 3-9 August were captured on *The Independent*’s front pages

Tizane Navea-Rogers

Russia claims North Pole

Putin asserts his nation’s ownership of 460,000 square miles of Arctic territory – and its huge reserves of oil and gas – after exploration feat of ‘unimaginable difficulty’

Richard Gere’s big lie

INDEPENDENT

BOLT BLOWS AWAY THE COMPETITION

Saddam annexes Kuwait

US troops arrive in Saudi Arabia to ‘draw line in the sand’ against Iraq

SUMMARY

Insurers get tough over Aids fears

Tehran holds Saudi Arabia and the US responsible for fatal riots in Mecca

Iran vows to avenge deaths of pilgrims

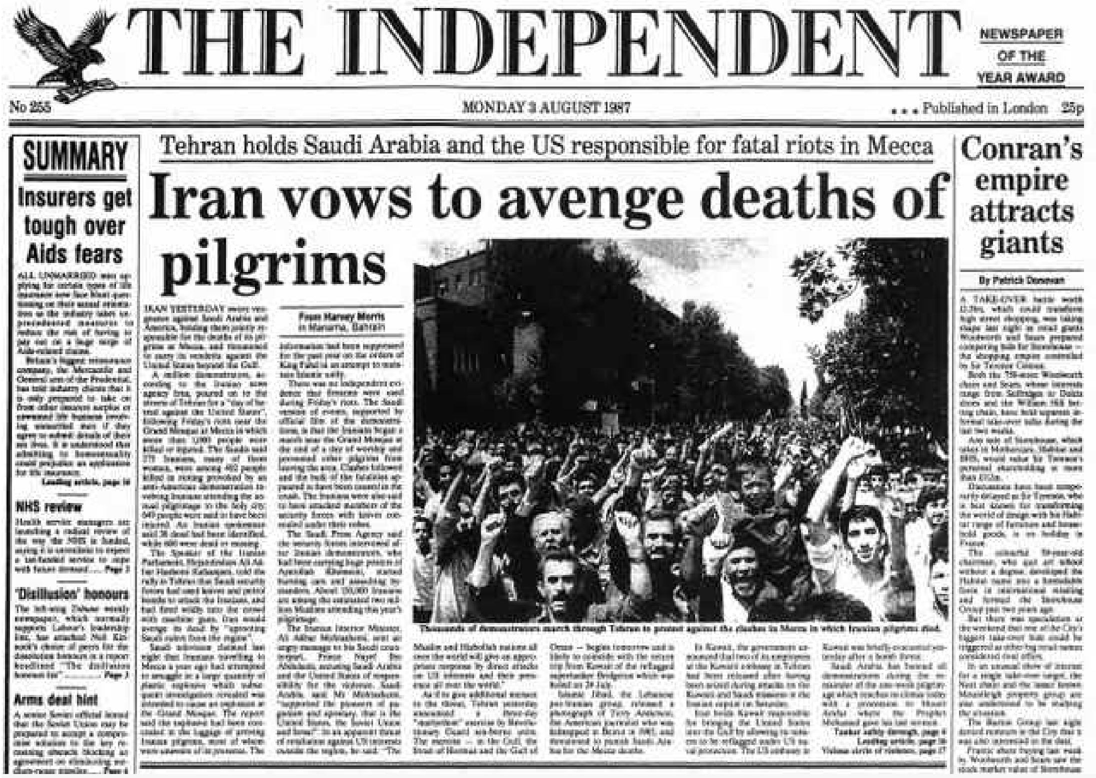
Conran’s empire attracts giants

(The Independent)

Russia stakes a claim on the North Pole. Iraq annexes Kuwait. The Croatian army sweeps into the rebel stronghold of Knin. This week, geopolitical faultlines fracture as nations attempt (and sometimes succeed) in rewriting borders. Further afield, tensions flare as Iran vows vengeance following fatal clashes in Mecca, while al-Qaeda truck bombs devastate US embassies in east Africa. On the sporting stage, the Olympics kick off in spectacular style in China, and Usain Bolt leaves London awestruck with a record-breaking 9.63-second sprint. Explore all this and more in these front pages of *The Independent*.

3 August 1987 – Iran threatens vengeance over Mecca pilgrim deaths

Iran vows vengeance against Saudi Arabia and the US after violent clashes during the Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca leave hundreds dead. The bloody confrontation between Iranian demonstrators and Saudi security forces triggered a lethal stampede that killed over 400 people. The tragedy severely escalated regional tensions, prompting Tehran and Riyadh to sever diplomatic ties for years.



THE INDEPENDENT

NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR AWARD

No 255

MONDAY 3 AUGUST 1987

... Published in London 25p

SUMMARY

Insurers get tough over Aids fears

NHS review

'Disillusion' honours

Arms deal hint

Tehran holds Saudi Arabia and the US responsible for fatal riots in Mecca

Iran vows to avenge deaths of pilgrims

From Harvey Morris in Manama, Bahrain

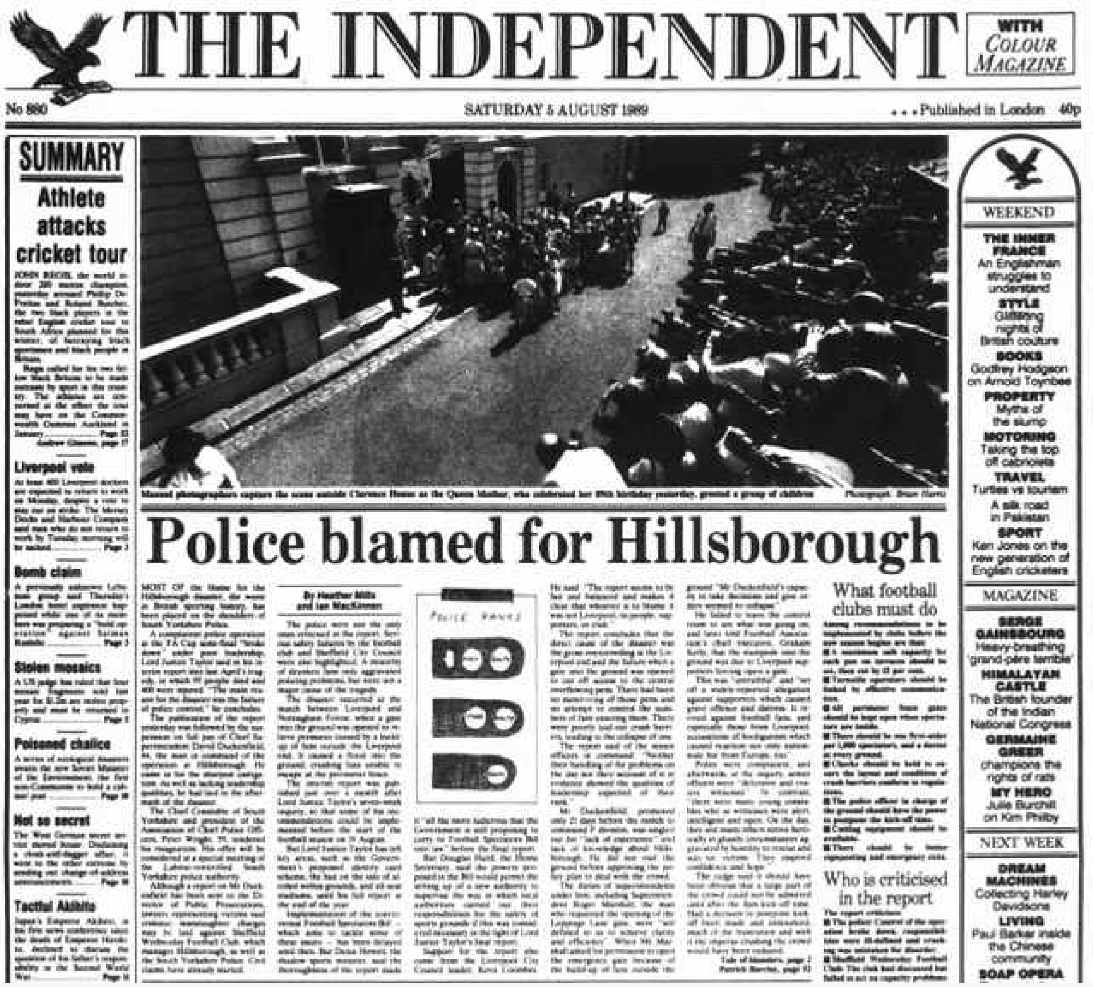
Conran's empire attracts giants

By Patrick Donovan

(The Independent)

5 August 1989 – Police blamed for Hillsborough disaster

Lord Justice Taylor's interim report places the "main reason" for the Hillsborough disaster squarely on the shoulders of South Yorkshire Police. In a sweeping indictment of the fatal FA Cup semi-final, the report condemns police complacency and a total failure of crowd control that led to 97 tragic deaths. However, it would still take decades of campaigning by families before the victims were officially ruled unlawfully killed.



THE INDEPENDENT

WITH COLOUR MAGAZINE

No 880

SATURDAY 5 AUGUST 1989

. . . Published in London 40p

SUMMARY

Athlete attacks cricket tour

Liverpool vote

Bomb claim

Stolen mosaics

Poisoned chalice

Not so secret

Tactful Akihito

Police blamed for Hillsborough

By Heather Mills and Ian MacKinnon

What football clubs must do

Who is criticised in the report

WEEKEND

THE INNER FRANCE
An Englishman struggles to understand

STYLE
Glittering nights of British couture

BOOKS
Godfrey Hodgson on Arnold Toynbee

PROPERTY
Myths of the slump

MOTORING
Taking the top off cabriolets

TRAVEL
Turtles vs tourism

A silk road in Pakistan

SPORT
Ken Jones on the new generation of English cricketers

MAGAZINE

SERGE GAINSBOURG
Heavy-breathing 'grand-père terrible'

HIMALAYAN CASTLE
The British founder of the Indian National Congress

GERMAINE GREER
champions the rights of rats

MY HERO
Julie Burchill on Kim Philby

NEXT WEEK

DREAM MACHINES
Collecting Harley Davidsons

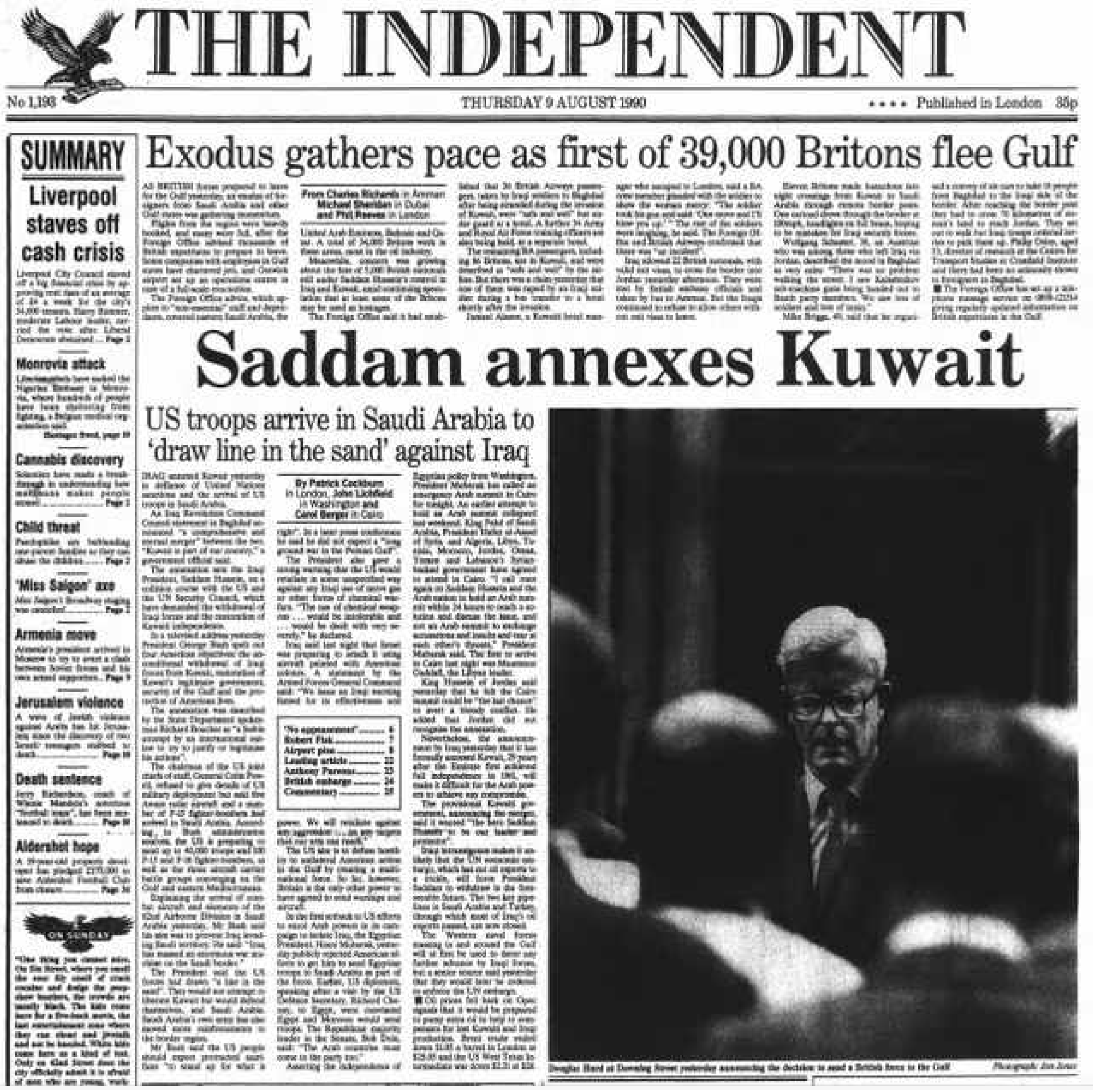
LIVING
Paul Barker inside the Chinese community

SOAP OPERA

(The Independent)

9 August 1990 – Iraq annexes Kuwait

Saddam Hussein formally annexes Kuwait, declaring it the 19th province of Iraq and defying intense international condemnation. When Hussein later ignores a UN deadline to withdraw, the US-led coalition launches Operation Desert Storm in January 1991. The massive aerial and ground campaign successfully liberates Kuwait within weeks.



THE INDEPENDENT

No 1,193 THURSDAY 9 AUGUST 1990 Published in London 35p

SUMMARY

Liverpool staves off cash crisis

Monrovia attack

Cannabis discovery

Child threat

'Miss Saigon' axe

Armenia move

Jerusalem violence

Death sentence

Aldershot hope

Exodus gathers pace as first of 39,000 Britons flee Gulf

From Charles Richards in Amman, Michael Sheridan in Dubai and Phil Reeves in London

Saddam annexes Kuwait

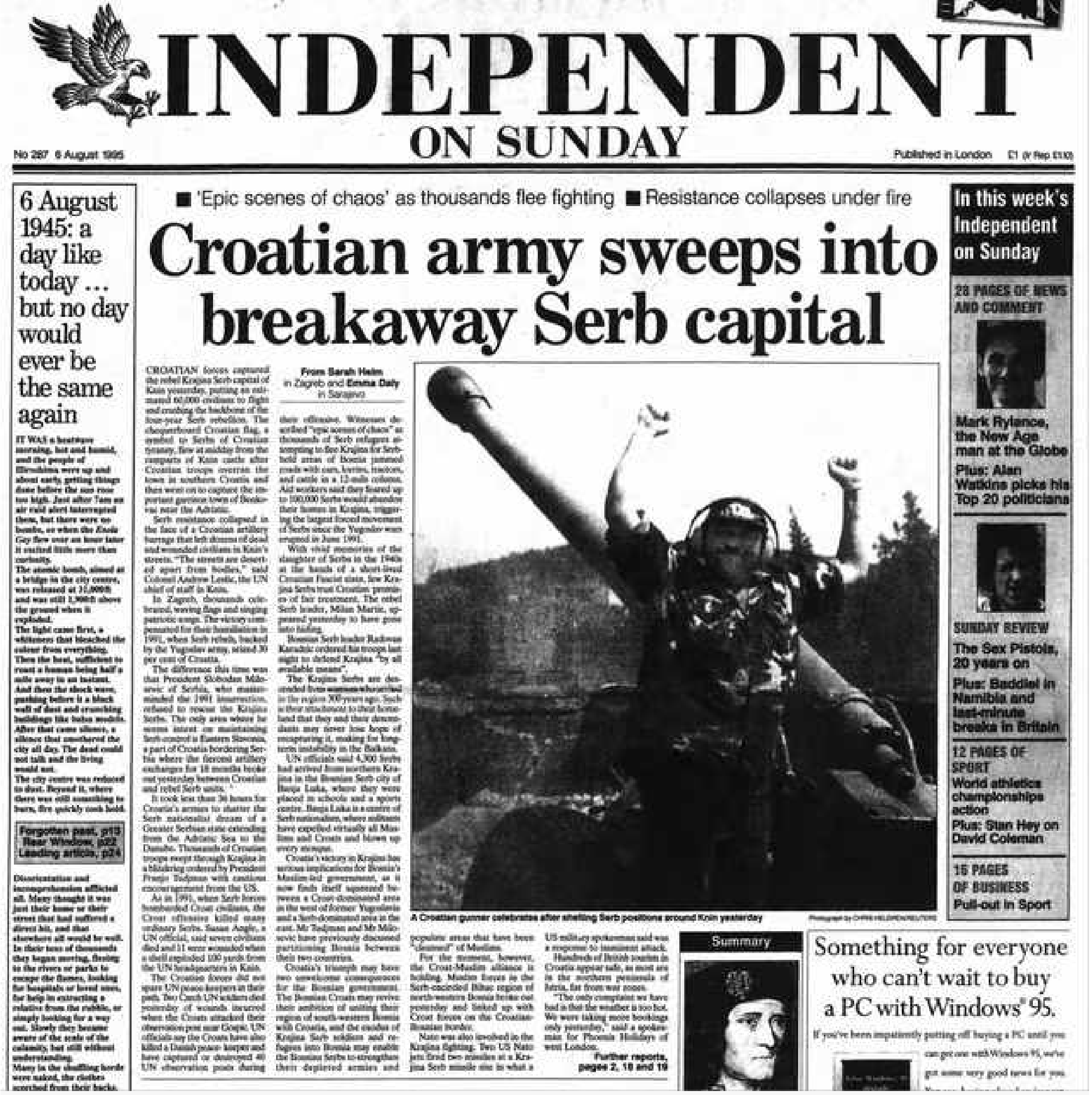
US troops arrive in Saudi Arabia to 'draw line in the sand' against Iraq

By Patrick Cockburn in London, John Lichfield in Washington and Carol Berger in Cairo

(The Independent)

6 August 1995 – Croatian army captures rebel Serb capital

Croatian forces seize the rebel stronghold of Knin during Operation Storm, effectively crushing the four-year rebellion by Krajina Serbs. Tens of thousands flee the military offensive, creating one of the largest refugee crises of the Yugoslav wars. But the victory would mark a major turning point in the region and effectively bring the Croatian war of independence to a close.



INDEPENDENT

ON SUNDAY

No 287 6 August 1995

Published in London £1 (Ir Rep £1.10)

6 August 1945: a day like today … but no day would ever be the same again

Forgotten past, p13
Rear Window, p22
Leading article, p24

■ 'Epic scenes of chaos' as thousands flee fighting ■ Resistance collapses under fire

Croatian army sweeps into breakaway Serb capital

From Sarah Helm in Zagreb and Emma Daly in Sarajevo

A Croatian gunner celebrates after shelling Serb positions around Knin yesterday

Further reports, pages 2, 18 and 19

Summary

In this week's Independent on Sunday

28 PAGES OF NEWS AND COMMENT

Mark Rylance, the New Age man at the Globe

Plus: Alan Watkins picks his Top 20 politicians

SUNDAY REVIEW

The Sex Pistols, 20 years on

Plus: Baddiel in Namibia and last-minute breaks in Britain

12 PAGES OF SPORT

World athletics championships action

Plus: Stan Hey on David Coleman

15 PAGES OF BUSINESS

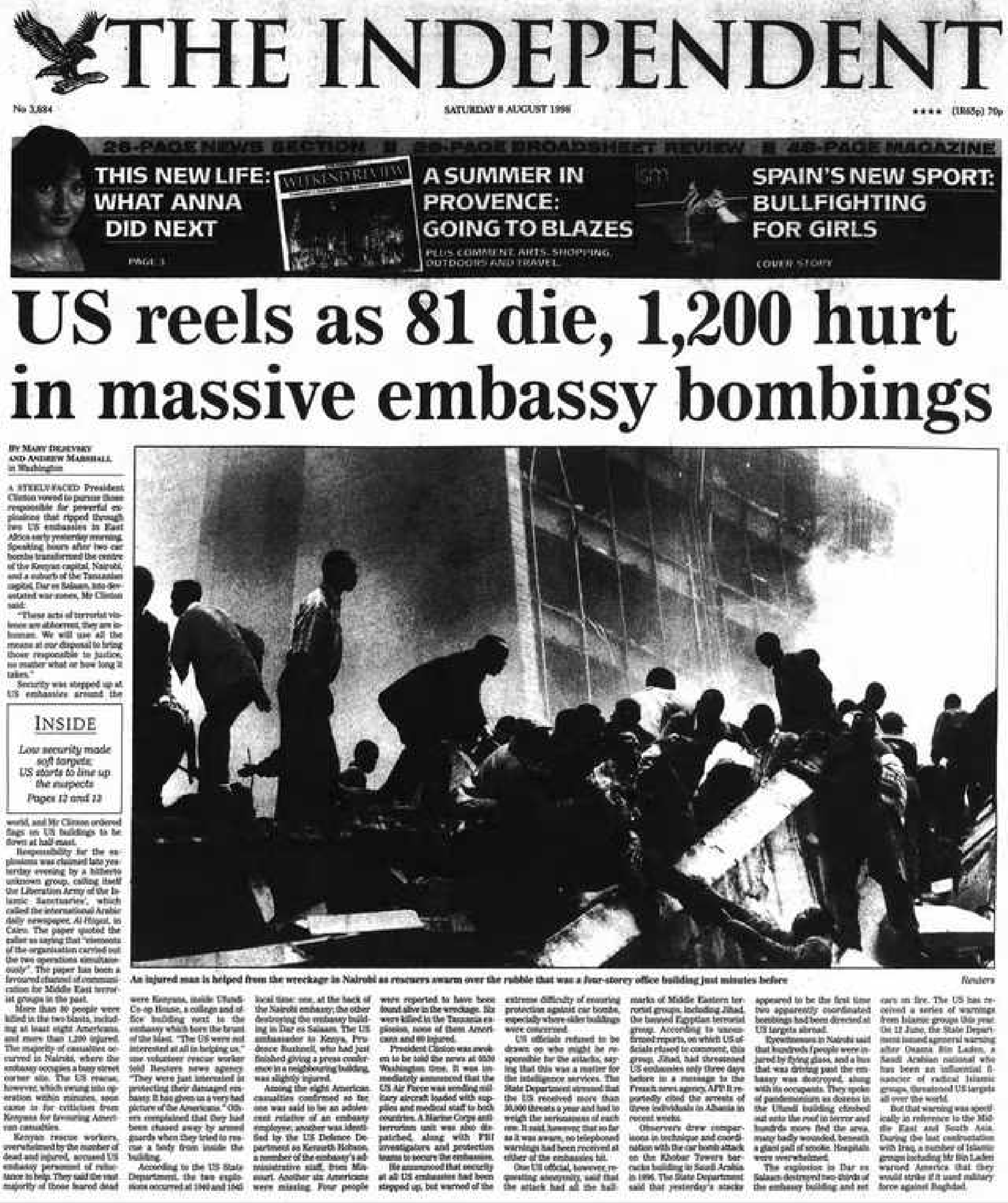
Pull-out in Sport

Something for everyone who can't wait to buy a PC with Windows® 95.

(The Independent)

8 August 1998 – Twin bombings target US embassies in East Africa

Two truck bombs explode outside US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, ultimately killing over 220 people and wounding more than 4,500 as the true toll emerged. The fatal attacks were quickly traced to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, thrusting the terror group into the global spotlight just three years before the September 11 attacks.



THE INDEPENDENT

No 3,684 SATURDAY 8 AUGUST 1998 ★★★★ (IR85p) 70p

28-PAGE NEWS SECTION ■ 28-PAGE BROADSHEET REVIEW ■ 48-PAGE MAGAZINE

THIS NEW LIFE: WHAT ANNA DID NEXT
PAGE 3

A SUMMER IN PROVENCE: GOING TO BLAZES
PLUS COMMENT, ARTS, SHOPPING, OUTDOORS AND TRAVEL

SPAIN'S NEW SPORT: BULLFIGHTING FOR GIRLS
COVER STORY

US reels as 81 die, 1,200 hurt in massive embassy bombings

BY MARY DEJEVSKY
AND ANDREW MARSHALL
in Washington

INSIDE

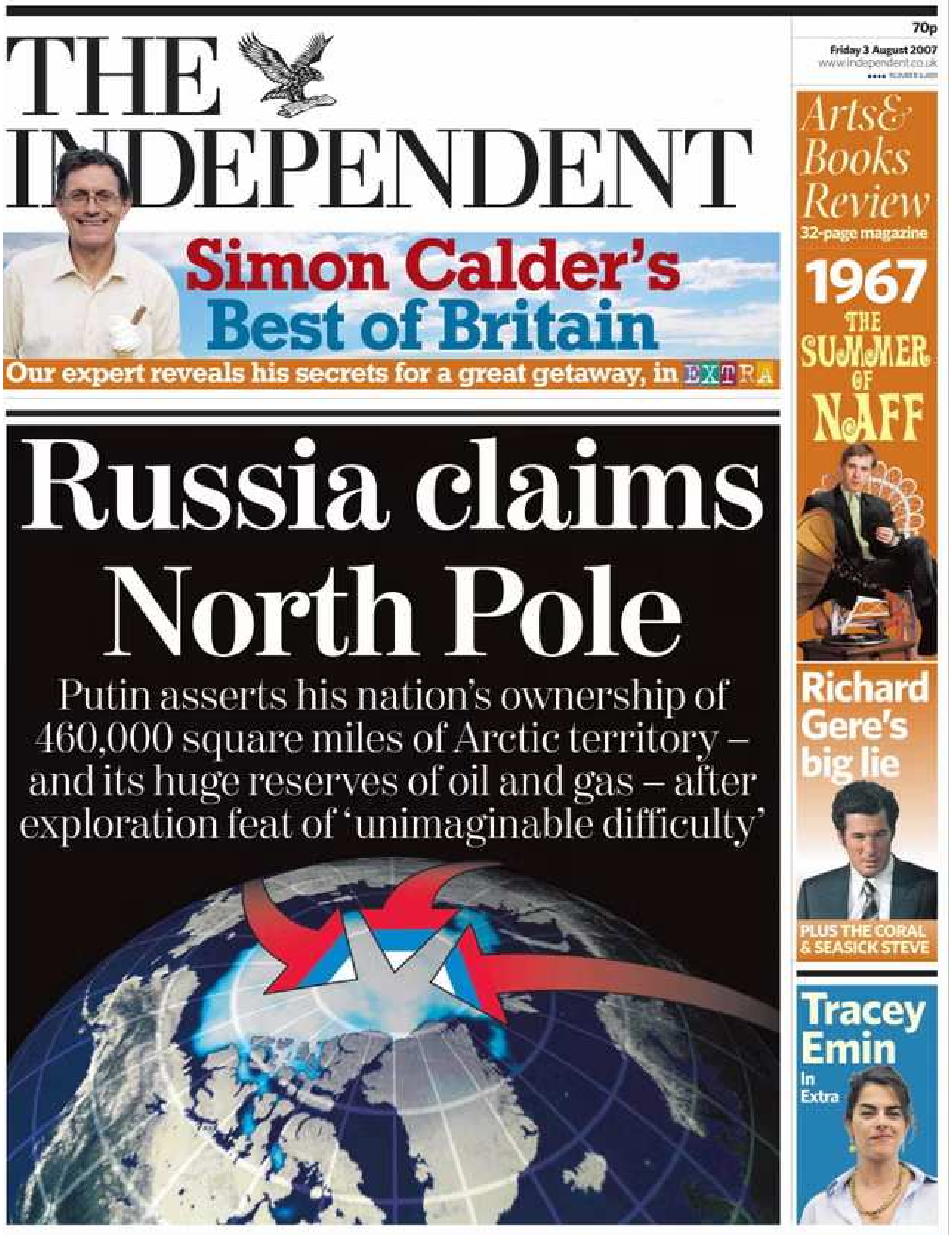
Low security made soft targets;
US starts to line up the suspects
Pages 12 and 13

An injured man is helped from the wreckage in Nairobi as rescuers swarm over the rubble that was a four-storey office building just minutes before *Reuters*

(The Independent)

3 August 2007 – Russia claims the North Pole and its resources

Russian explorers plant a rust-proof titanium flag on the Arctic seabed during a highly publicised submarine dive. The mission was designed to support Moscow's claim over 460,000 square miles of territory and its vast unexploited energy reserves. However, rival nations quickly dismiss the move as an illegal stunt.



THE INDEPENDENT

70p

Friday 3 August 2007

www.independent.co.uk

Simon Calder's Best of Britain

Our expert reveals his secrets for a great getaway, in EXTRA

Russia claims North Pole

Putin asserts his nation's ownership of 460,000 square miles of Arctic territory – and its huge reserves of oil and gas – after exploration feat of 'unimaginable difficulty'

Arts& Books Review

32-page magazine

1967 THE SUMMER OF NAFF

Richard Gere's big lie

PLUS THE CORAL & SEASICK STEVE

Tracey Emin

In Extra

(The Independent)

9 August 2008 – Beijing Olympics opens with historic ceremony

A global audience of about two billion tuned into the opening ceremony of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. Directed by acclaimed filmmaker Zhang Yimou, the four-hour spectacle featured a cast of 15,000 performers, including 2,008 synchronised drummers. The production won widespread international praise despite the ongoing political controversies overshadowing the Games.

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PUZZLE SPECIAL

THE INDEPENDENT

£1.50
Saturday 9 August 2008
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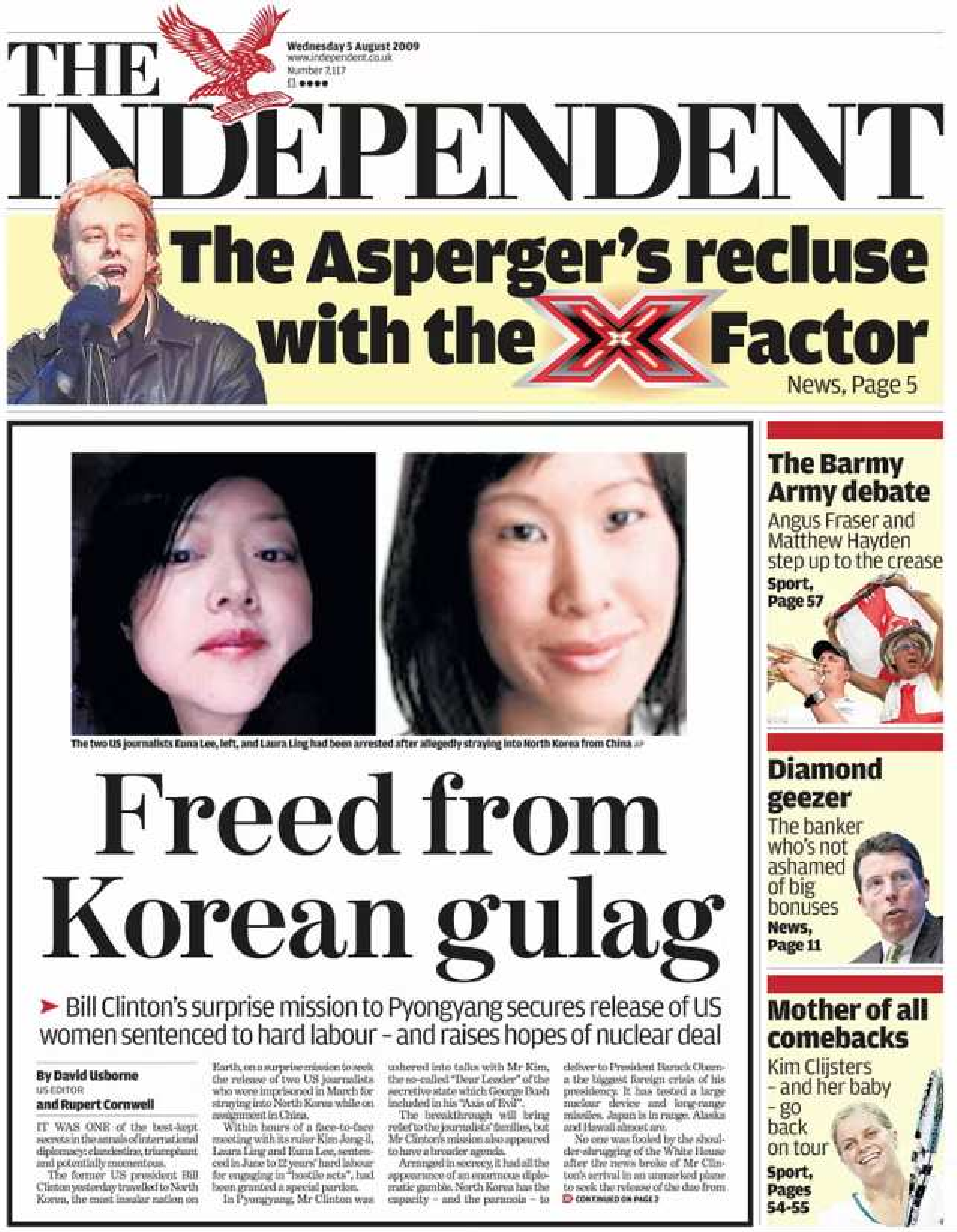
Olympic Edition
Pages 2-5, 34&35
Sport, pages 69-73

(The Independent)

5 August 2009 – Bill Clinton secures the release of US journalists in North Korea

Former US president Bill Clinton completes a surprise diplomatic mission to Pyongyang to secure the release of American journalists Euna Lee and Laura Ling. The reporters had been sentenced to 12 years of hard labour after being detained by guards near the Chinese border. Although the highly secretive trip successfully brought the women home, contemporary hopes that the meeting with Kim Jong-il might spark a breakthrough nuclear deal never materialised.



THE INDEPENDENT

Wednesday 5 August 2009
www.independent.co.uk
Number 7,117
£1 ●●●●

The Asperger's recluse with the X Factor

News, Page 5

The two US journalists Euna Lee, left, and Laura Ling had been arrested after allegedly straying into North Korea from China AP

Freed from Korean gulag

➤ Bill Clinton's surprise mission to Pyongyang secures release of US women sentenced to hard labour – and raises hopes of nuclear deal

By David Usborne
US EDITOR
and Rupert Cornwell

IT WAS ONE of the best-kept secrets in the annals of international diplomacy: clandestine, triumphant and potentially momentous.

The former US president Bill Clinton yesterday travelled to North Korea, the most insular nation on Earth, on a surprise mission to seek the release of two US journalists who were imprisoned in March for straying into North Korea while on assignment in China.

Within hours of a face-to-face meeting with its ruler Kim Jong-il, Laura Ling and Euna Lee, sentenced in June to 12 years' hard labour for engaging in "hostile acts", had been granted a special pardon.

In Pyongyang, Mr Clinton was ushered into talks with Mr Kim, the so-called "Dear Leader" of the secretive state which George Bush included in his "Axis of Evil".

The breakthrough will bring relief to the journalists' families, but Mr Clinton's mission also appeared to have a broader agenda.

Arranged in secrecy, it had all the appearance of an enormous diplomatic gamble. North Korea has the capacity – and the paranoia – to deliver to President Barack Obama the biggest foreign crisis of his presidency. It has tested a large nuclear device and long-range missiles. Japan is in range. Alaska and Hawaii almost are.

No one was fooled by the shoulder-shrugging of the White House after the news broke of Mr Clinton's arrival in an unmarked plane to seek the release of the duo from

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

The Barmy Army debate
Angus Fraser and Matthew Hayden step up to the crease
Sport, Page 57

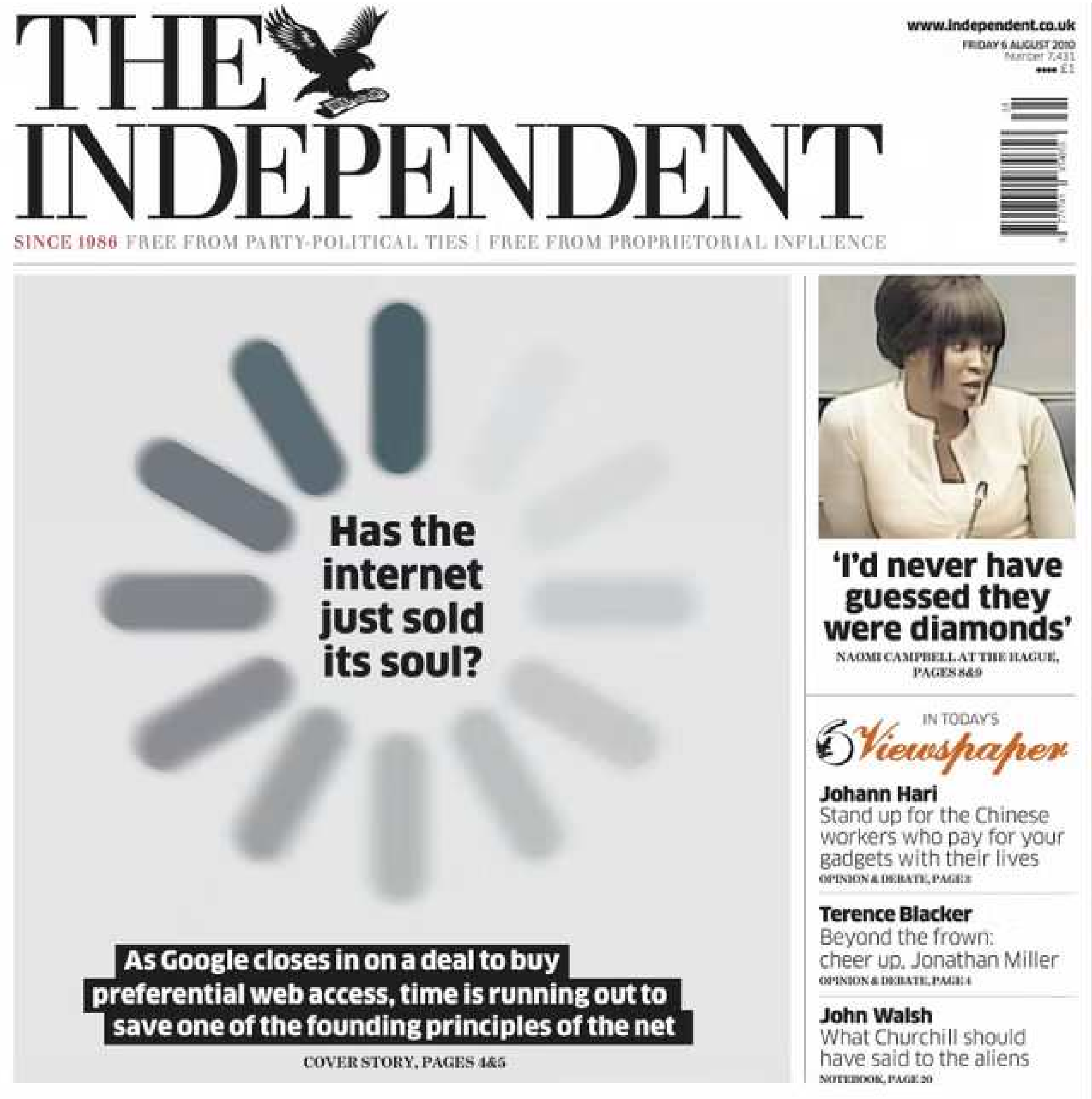
Diamond geezer
The banker who's not ashamed of big bonuses
News, Page 11

Mother of all comebacks
Kim Clijsters – and her baby – go back on tour
Sport, Pages 54-55

(The Independent)

6 August 2010 – Tech giants threaten 'soul' of internet

Reports emerge that Google and Verizon are negotiating a pact that could effectively end the “founding principles” of an open internet. Digital rights advocates strongly criticise the proposed deal, which would allow service providers to charge companies for faster wireless network speeds. The strong backlash ultimately helped block the deal and forced governments to implement tighter internet protections.



THE INDEPENDENT

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www.independent.co.uk
FRIDAY 6 AUGUST 2010
Number 7,431
£1

Has the internet just sold its soul?

As Google closes in on a deal to buy preferential web access, time is running out to save one of the founding principles of the net

COVER STORY, PAGES 4&5

‘I’d never have guessed they were diamonds’

NAOMI CAMPBELL AT THE HAGUE, PAGES 8&9

IN TODAY’S Viewspaper

Johann Hari
Stand up for the Chinese workers who pay for your gadgets with their lives
OPINION & DEBATE, PAGE 3

Terence Blacker
Beyond the frown: cheer up, Jonathan Miller
OPINION & DEBATE, PAGE 4

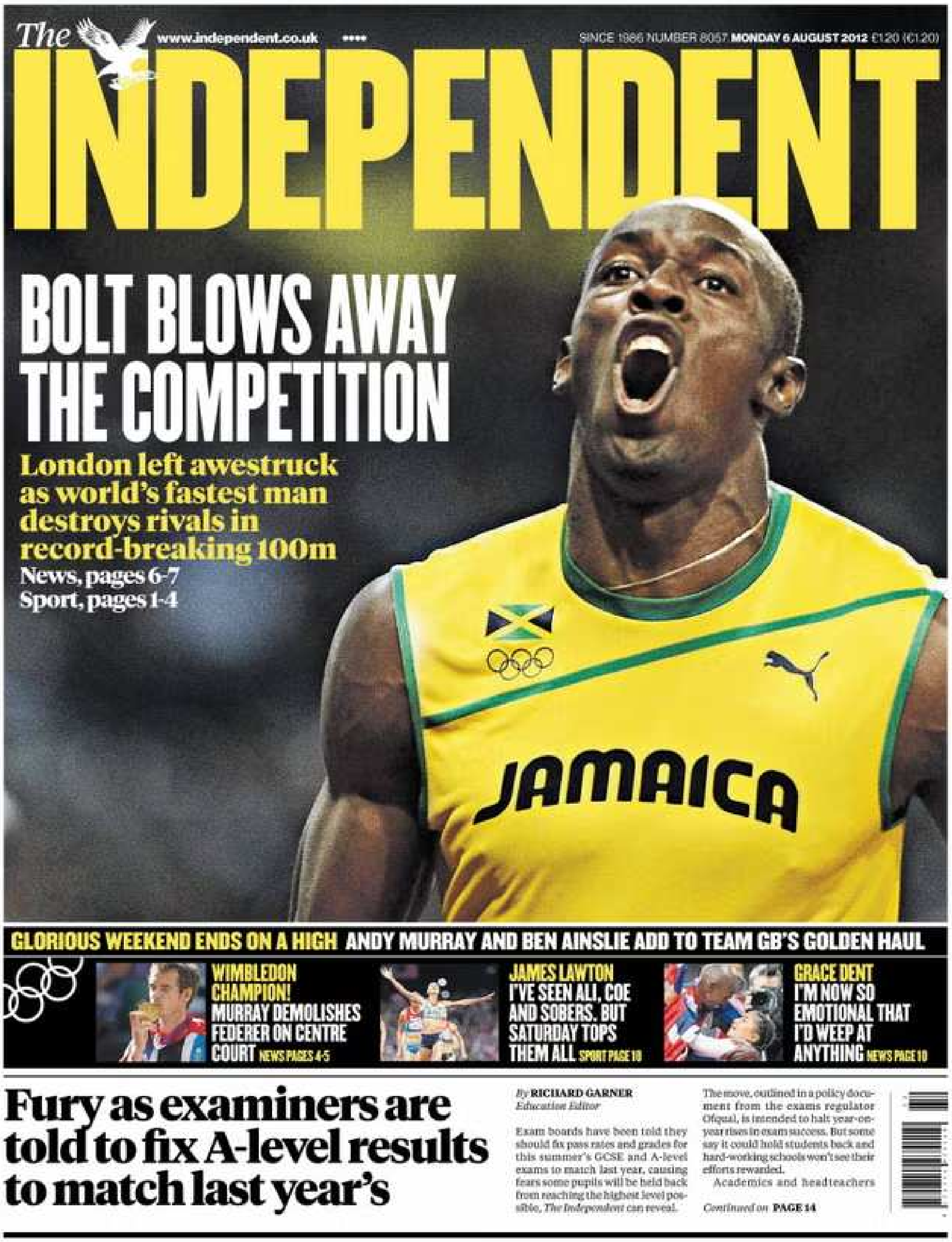
John Walsh
What Churchill should have said to the aliens
NOTEBOOK, PAGE 20

(The Independent)

5 August 2012 – Usain Bolt breaks the Olympic 100m record in London

Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt defends his Olympic title in the 100m final at the London 2012 Games and crosses the finish line in a blistering 9.63 seconds, beating his own previous Olympic record set in Beijing four years earlier. To this day, his 9.63-

second finish in London remains the Olympic record for the men's 100m, standing unbroken across subsequent Games.



The INDEPENDENT www.independent.co.uk •••• SINCE 1986 NUMBER 8057 **MONDAY 6 AUGUST 2012** £1.20 (€1.20)

BOLT BLOWS AWAY THE COMPETITION

London left awestruck as world's fastest man destroys rivals in record-breaking 100m

News, pages 6-7
Sport, pages 1-4

GLORIOUS WEEKEND ENDS ON A HIGH ANDY MURRAY AND BEN AINSLIE ADD TO TEAM GB'S GOLDEN HAUL

WIMBLEDON CHAMPION! MURRAY DEMOLISHES FEDERER ON CENTRE COURT NEWS PAGES 4-5

JAMES LAWTON I'VE SEEN ALI, COE AND SOBERS. BUT SATURDAY TOPS THEM ALL SPORT PAGE 10

GRACE DENT I'M NOW SO EMOTIONAL THAT I'D WEEP AT ANYTHING NEWS PAGE 10

Fury as examiners are told to fix A-level results to match last year's

By **RICHARD GARNER**
Education Editor

Exam boards have been told they should fix pass rates and grades for this summer's GCSE and A-level exams to match last year, causing fears some pupils will be held back from reaching the highest level possible, *The Independent* can reveal.

The move, outlined in a policy document from the exams regulator Ofqual, is intended to halt year-on-year rises in exam success. But some say it could hold students back and hard-working schools won't see their efforts rewarded.

Academics and headteachers

Continued on **PAGE 14**

(The Independent)

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The runcation is on the rise – and I’ve found the perfect place to go

With many people now making running the focal point of their forays abroad, **Harry Bullmore** headed to New Zealand to take part in an ultramarathon… and pack a few more adventures in

Maxx-pack it in: Bullmore had a full itinerary on his first runcation *(Harry Bullmore/The Independent)*

A poolside holiday is many people’s dream scenario. But as a fidgety fitness journalist, it’s the antithesis of what I want from a trip abroad.

If I’m travelling somewhere new, I want to see things that I couldn’t see at home. If these things are tall, I want to climb them; if they are filled with water, I want to swim in them. Full immersion is – often, quite literally – the goal.

Recent research from Pure New Zealand suggests I'm not alone. It found 53 per cent of surveyed Brits identify as "maxx-packers" – people who want to cram as many activities into their forays abroad as possible. Bonus points for anything that spikes the heart rate.

This might explain the rise of the "runcation" – a growing trend in which people head abroad with the primary aim of taking part in a race or running event. The rest of the stay is invariably filled with similarly high-octane activities.

But is this enjoyable, or an energy-sapping way to spend your annual leave? As an avid exerciser who has stuck to traditional city breaks in the past, I headed to New Zealand to find out – and run 50-plus kilometres up a mountain in the process.

My New Zealand runcation road trip

To nail the maxx-packing spirit, Pure New Zealand set me up with a GO Rentals car (an integral ingredient) and created a 13-day road trip around the country's South Island, complete with an itinerary fit to burst. I then tacked on an extra seven days of solo travelling.

The run, a 50km trail race containing 2,600m of climbing, would take place on day nine in the Central Otago region – near New Zealand's most inland point. Before then, I would whizz down the east coast, stopping at the quiet coastal town of Timaru and New Zealand's "wildlife capital" Dunedin.

In the aftermath of the race, I was to head to the adrenaline junkie's paradise that is Queenstown, before returning to Christchurch via Glenorchy, Te Anau, Wanaka and Akaroa.

FINISH
tailwind

‘The pride and satisfaction I felt at the finish line of the Northburn 100 race was like nothing I’d ever experienced’

Race day

The Northburn 100 is an annual ultra race in which competitors tackle mountainous routes of up to 100 miles. I opted for the 50km race – or the “fun run”, as race director Terry Davis fondly referred to it.

This is many people’s nightmare holiday activity, and I get that. But for me, someone who sneaks off first thing on group trips to squeeze in a run or bodyweight workout, it was fun to have my favourite pastime upgraded to a priority.

When carving out core memories on holidays, I often don’t realise just how special they are until they’re in the rear-view mirror. But throughout this race, I was acutely aware I was doing something I would never forget. I wanted immersion, and as I lumbered up mountains and chatted to fellow runners while leaping across a gurgling stream, I realised my wish had been granted.

Sports nutrition

If there’s one thing runners love – other than the obvious thing – it’s baked goods. New Zealand, it turns out, has fantastic offerings on both fronts – the pies are a highlight, with each town boasting its own delicious creations. For the best baked goods, I recommend U-Bake bakery on the outskirts of Timaru, an east coast town roughly two hours' drive from Christchurch.

I received a warm welcome from the owner, Simon Bruce, who stepped out of the kitchen to deliver a firm handshake. After loading me up with prize-winning hot cross buns, a filled baguette the size of my arm and the best pie I'd ever eaten, he removed his flour-laden apron and said: "You seem like a good guy, fancy a tour?"

What followed was not a whistle-stop whizz around tourist hotspots. It was a two-hour guide to Timaru's lesser-known gems, complete with amusing anecdotes and even a brief visit to his house.

This story sums up my New Zealand experience: friendly people, tasty pies, adventure, and fun. And while this was undoubtedly a highlight, it wasn't an isolated incident. At sunset, you can also see Little Blue Penguins scurry across Timaru's beach to return to their nests from the sea, which I think warrants a visit to this often overlooked town.

U-Bake
Bakery
e Rolls · Cakes · Slices · Savouries · Biscuits · Sandwiches · Bread · Pastries · Hot Cro
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OPEN

U-Bake's pie: a big impression

The greatest attractions cost nothing

If you choose a runcation, chances are you favour excitement over relaxation on your holidays. Luckily, New Zealand is the ultimate playground, and there is no age limit.

Many activities on this list cost money, and they are undeniably fun. But my favourite days came at the cost of a bit of petrol and a supermarket sandwich.

Wānaka demonstrated this best. The lakeside resort town offers a chilled alternative to the adrenaline-fuelled energy of traveller favourite Queenstown, but still delivers screensaver good looks and fantastic food options – Big Fig and The Food Truck Park offerings were personal favourites. There is also plenty to keep adventurous sorts busy.

A morning dunk in Lake Wānaka is a refreshing way to start the day, and the nearby hikes are tough to beat. The 10km Rob Roy Glacier Track, a one-hour (and bumpy) drive from Wānaka, was my pick of the bunch.

Where the action is: morning swims and hikes are among the reasons New Zealand is tough to beat for action

A bouncing swing bridge leads into Mount Aspiring National Park, where beech forests shield you from the sun as you climb.

Eventually, you emerge from the trees to a view of a hanging glacier and too many waterfalls to count – an idyllic spot for the aforementioned supermarket sandwich.

If you want more of a challenge, you can tackle Roy's Peak, which delivers largely unparalleled views as a reward for a long, steep climb. However, having emerged from an ultramarathon a few days prior, the more gentle inclines of the Glacier Track sounded more appealing to me.

On the way back from the Rob Roy Glacier Track, you can also find Wishbone Falls – a small waterfall that splits in two courtesy of protruding rocks, bending sunlight into an ever-present rainbow. It's hard to tell people you swam in a waterfall, under a rainbow, without sounding a tad braggy, and it's not one to be missed.

The view at the end of the Rob Roy Glacier Trail (left) and swimming at Wishbone Falls

A tour with a twist

I woke early on my first full day in New Zealand and drove 20-or-so minutes to Sumner Beach – Christchurch's picturesque seaside suburb. There, I met Traverse Trails founder Andy Annable for a running tour of a pretty nearby headland.

I find exercise, like alcohol, has a knack for sending inhibitions packing. As soon as my heart rate was raised, I was jabbering away to Andy about everything from local customs to childhood memories – an atmosphere at odds with the polite quietness of a classic boat or bus tour. This, he says, is why his groups tend to forge such strong bonds on their multi-day adventures.

When the hills became hard, we walked; when a view was too good to miss, we stopped to take pictures; when stomachs rumbled, Andy's Mary Poppins-esque backpack produced an endless supply of snacks. No land speed records were under threat, but it was one of the most enjoyable 10km runs I've ever done. It was also a good way to get the legs going post-flight without exhausting myself ahead of the race in 12 days' time.

Such is exercise's power to lower inhibitions that Harry picked up a bonus runner along the way

The adventure capital of the world

If you were to draw a Venn diagram of runners and thrill-seekers, I'd wager there would be a considerable mid-section. That's why I would recommend making a beeline for Queenstown – the "adventure capital of the world" – after your race is run. A stay at Coronet Ridge Resort, a stunning alpine-style wellness retreat on the outskirts, makes a good celebratory treat when tending to tired legs.

The big three activities in Queenstown are bungee jumping, jet boating and white water rafting, and my itinerary ticked every box. The first, white water rafting with RealNZ was an instant winner. Racing through rapids, with the option to tip into the water and tombstone off rocks at points during the course, felt like a refreshingly relaxed approach compared to the red tape that often surrounds outdoor activities.

Next came the bungee. I had opted out of the full jump at AJ Hackett's Kawarau Bridge bungee – the world's first commercial site – and instead plumped for the relaxing-sounding "swing". When I arrived, I found this was less of a swing and more of a seat attached to bungee cords, which was winched out over a canyon then dropped from 141 feet.

Bungee jumping's not for everyone, but jet boating is a lot of fun

It was, in a word, awful. My lungs felt like they were going to shoot from my mouth, but what came out instead was a series of expletives not suitable for these pages. Then, in milliseconds, it was over. People who enjoy being chucked off a cliff or bridge will love this, but it's not for me.

Later the same day came a trip to Oxbow Adventure Co for a jet sprint boat experience. On a private man-made lake, the boat accelerates from nought to 100kmph in two-and-a-half seconds, careering around small islands to deliver four g-forces. It's over in the blink of an eye, but it left me grinning like an excited schoolboy.

However, my top activity in the town was not one of the big three. Instead, it was Queenstown Luge – a 1.6km mountaintop downhill track for gravity-powered go-karts. If you've ever played *Mario Kart* and wished it was real, this is a dream come true.

The gravity-powered go-karts of Queenstown's Skyline Luge trumped many other extreme activities

Real culture outside of museum walls

New Zealand has a fascinating history. Due to its remote location, it was the last major landmass to be settled by humans. In the 13th century, East Polynesian travellers arrived in huge open-topped canoes called *waka hourua*, establishing what would become Māori culture.

To learn more, I headed to a site just outside Timaru for a Māori rock art tour. I met my guide and followed her in my car down a dirt track, eventually turning a corner into one of the most beautiful places I've ever visited.

The space has been repopulated with indigenous plant species. Lush grass paths wind through the middle, taking you to a series of caves containing preserved examples of rock art, including an enormous piece which depicts the Māori creation story.

A few days later, I travelled to the seaside village of Karitane, further south on the east coast, for a Māori Pa experience. Here, my guide took me to the Huriawa peninsula and taught me about the colourful past of this former fortified settlement.

I said at the start that full immersion was the aim of this trip. Rarely did it feel closer at hand than when learning about the founders of the country and its culture.

The rock art tour on the outskirts of Pleasant Point, near Timaru, was a high point

Sea lions, penguins – and stunning scenery

New Zealand's fascinating history extends to its wildlife. As an island nation, its only indigenous land mammals are a smattering of bat species, with birds dominating the country until Europeans arrived with the likes of livestock, rabbits, stoats and weasels.

Dunedin has been dubbed the "wildlife capital of New Zealand", and there is no better place to learn more about the nation's animals.

I went with Clearwater Wildlife Tours, whose minibus whizzes you from the centre of Dunedin to the Otago Peninsula. The scenery was stunning, as most of the South Island seems to be, but it was the insights from my guide Adrian that made the tour special. Every new bird species spotted came with oodles of information, fun facts and enjoyable anecdotes from his time working in wildlife conservation.

After a short drive, we arrived at a private beach filled with grandstanding sea lions. Somehow, from a distance, Adrian also picked out several endangered yellow-eyed penguins and directed my on-loan binoculars until I could spot them too.

This activity delivered immersion and excitement without tuckering out my legs too much in the days before the race.

The Dunedin wildlife tour: Insightful anecdotes, wildlife galore and stunning views

Should you go on a runcation?

Do runcations work? From my experience, it’s an emphatic “yes”. If you love moving, having your hobby shifted to the main mission on a holiday – rather than an early-hours side quest – feels fantastic.

Granted, if you want to hit a PB, a slightly quieter itinerary than mine could be helpful for conserving energy ahead of race day.

But for me, I just wanted to finish the race, and I was not going to miss any opportunity to explore after travelling halfway around the world.

Guides told me that while mountain bikers and adrenaline chasers are often drawn to their shores, runners tend to overlook the country. If so, they're missing out. From my experience, finding a part of the South Island that isn't breathtakingly beautiful is a hard task. Every town and city has plenty of parks and botanical gardens you can use for easy runs, while the outskirts play host to countless marked trails if you're after more of a challenge.

There is a wealth of activities on offer, both relaxed and active, to fill far more than a three-week stay. And to refuel? I'm not sure this is sports nutritionist-approved, but I know a good place you can get a pie.

Back to top ⤒

Newcastle are at a crossroads – can little-known Jaissle find a new way?

Stripped of their stars, manager and identity, Newcastle look in decline – but, **Richard Jolly** writes, new German manager Matthias Jaissle may prove a shrewd appointment

Newcastle require a rebuild after the loss of Kieran Trippier, Anthony Gordon and Sandro Tonali *(Photos PA)*

There was a time, a couple of years ago, when it was rumoured a double Champions League winner was Eddie Howe’s probable replacement at Newcastle. Rubbish, according to some close to the club: they were not going for Jose Mourinho. Instead, after Howe’s departure, a double Asian Champions League winner is taking over, in Matthias Jaissle.

Young, German, relatively unknown and an advocate of pressing, Jaissle represents a very different kind of appointment. The second manager brought in since Newcastle's Saudi takeover, the 38-year-old joins a club at a crossroads; one interpretation is that they are changing direction, another that they are going backwards.

Brilliant though the job Howe did was, the scale of the task Jaissle inherits does not merely reflect the difficulty of following the first manager to take a domestic trophy to Tyneside since the 1950s or of managing expectations.

Matthias Jaissle looks set to be the next Newcastle manager *(Getty)*

When Newcastle start their season against Liverpool, they will almost certainly be without the four players of most pedigree who started the equivalent fixture last August: Kieran Trippier and Anthony Gordon, the only Englishmen to score in World Cup semi-finals since 1990, and Sandro Tonali and Bruno Guimaraes, Newcastle's two classiest midfielders in decades.

Guimaraes' probable move to Arsenal, following Tonali's £100m transfer to Tottenham and Gordon's £69m switch to Barcelona, will create multiple holes. Part of Jaissle's job will be one of persuasion: ensuring that three big sales this summer, after the veteran Trippier left when his contract expired, do not become a rush to the exits, with players such as Lewis Hall and Tino Livramento following.

A side that had a surfeit of leaders could soon look short of them. Dan Burn is the logical successor to Guimaraes as captain, even if the long-term ideal may be to pair Sven Botman with Malick Thiaw in the heart of the defence. But as Newcastle overdoes it on youth, there are few other alternatives as skipper.

Dan Burn could be Newcastle's next captain

A midfield that ranked among the best is no more, with the departure of the two most stylish components, only Joelinton remaining and questions if he may be in decline. The arrivals of 20-year-old Aladji Bamba and 18-year-old Sean Steur show Newcastle have started to build their next-gen midfield; but each has only had a season of regular first-team football. They are long-term acquisitions, but Newcastle will have short-term imperatives. Some sort of unit is required: the precocious Lewis Miley should be in it, but there are doubts about Joe Willock's future and Jacob Ramsey had an underwhelming first year in the north-east.

And even with high-calibre players, Newcastle were reliant on Guimaraes. Since he broke into the team in 2022, they only won two league games without the Brazilian. He was their top scorer in the top flight last season and their talisman.

Newcastle have been reliant upon Bruno Guimaraes

In attack, Jaissle is confronted with the problem that seemed to confound Howe: what to do with the £125m duo who were bought with the proceeds of Alexander Isak's sale. Had Howe stayed, the probability was that Will Osula would have started the season as the first-choice striker, not the £55m Yoane Wissa or the £69m Nick Woltemade. The Congolese had a good World Cup but scored one goal in 19 league games for Newcastle; the German sometimes ended up as a No 10 or a No 8 under Howe during a spell of one in 26 in all competitions.

Anthony Elanga was a third unsuccessful attacking addition last summer, though, like Wissa, he showed some of his ability at the World Cup. Gordon's sale should at least resolve a problem Newcastle created for themselves: he and Harvey Barnes were both best suited to the left flank and now the latter, perhaps the best finisher at the club, should be starting, though the £42m Bazoumana Toure has also arrived.

Harvey Barnes could be given a bigger role after the departure of Anthony Gordon

But he is one of four newcomers who cost more than £100m between them but are aged 18 or 20; Newcastle’s change in recruitment policy may have been enforced by financial regulations, and a Uefa fine for breaching spending caps, but it means that both they need to improve the emerging talents they have bought and get results in the meantime.

In goal, it is notable that Howe’s perennial target James Trafford has eluded them; enter Ewen Jaouen and, probably, Lukas Hornicek, the latter seemingly to start and presumably to prompt Nick Pope’s exit.

But the rebuilding feels unfinished: with Trippier going, they lack alternatives to Hall and Livramento in the full-back roles. With Guimaraes going, they may need another midfielder. For now, centre-back may be the only position where Newcastle have both proven quality and quantity.

Howe leaves a weakening Newcastle squad behind

Elsewhere, they have imported potential but have ended up selling successful signings and keeping some so far unsuccessful ones. Howe ultimately joined the ranks of managers who constructed one terrific team but not a second at the same club. Whatever the current squad becomes, for now the starting 11 could look Newcastle's weakest since Howe kept them up in 2022.

They come off a demoralising second half of last season, are further jolted by Howe's decision to step away and begin the campaign with potentially chastening reunions with Isak and Tonali. There is a lot that could go wrong.

The counter-argument is that much has gone right in Jaissle's coaching career. Newcastle can look at his win percentages with Liefering, RB Salzburg and Al-Ahli – 64, 68 and 65 respectively – and hope for something similar.

Matthias Jaissle boasts a strong record but has taken a tough job

But the warnings come from their own history. Newcastle can seem dependent on the minority of managers who can galvanise a club and a region. After Kevin Keegan left (the first time), they finished in the bottom half in each of the next four full seasons. After Bobby Robson's sacking, they did that year and in three of the next four. Howe's reign ended in the anti-climax of 12th place, and Jaissle takes on a team that has then been stripped of its stars, deprived of its manager and plunged into transition.

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Five key selection decisions England must make ahead of Pakistan series

Harry Latham-Coyle

Captain Joe Root must figure out how best to replace the retired all-rounder Ben Stokes *(PA)*

A curious summer for England will continue in August as Pakistan arrive for a three-Test tour with Marcus Trescothick in interim charge of the hosts.

Stephen Fleming has been installed as Brendon McCullum’s successor with the Test team, but will not take up his role until September, leaving Trescothick to join a reappointed Joe Root in trying to set a new direction after a bruising series against New Zealand earlier in the year.

While Fleming will have some say in selection, the indications are that Trescothick and Root will be prominent voices, too, alongside selector Marcus North – who is set to speak after the squad is unveiled next week.

The retirement of Ben Stokes leaves a significant hole with England apparently lacking a like-for-like replacement as a seam-bowling all-rounder, with the knock-on impacts perhaps significant for the composition of the rest of the attack.

There may be batting places to think about, too, with Jacob Bethell a slight injury doubt. Here are five key decisions to be made:

How to replace Ben Stokes?

The first question is one without a straightforward answer. Stokes' batting powers may have, statistically, been on the wane, but he remained a force with the ball and a vital balancing figure within any XI. England looked uneasy during the second New Zealand Test when without their then-captain – better solutions must be found.

Rehan Ahmed could be an option as an all-rounder *(Getty)*

It feels likely that England search for a spinning all-rounder to replace Stokes at No 7. Rehan Ahmed has long been liked though lacks the bowling volume and, perhaps, consistency that England might desire; Will Jacks has not featured in a Test squad since the Ashes and similarly has a way to go with his second skill. More leftfield, to some extent, options could include James Coles, the Sussex batting all-rounder, or Calvin Harrison, so impressive for Northants in all three facets over the last couple of years.

Could Sam Curran come under consideration? The left-armer worked closely with Fleming at the Chennai Super Kings a few years ago, and also under Root during the skipper's first stint. A lack of recent red-ball experience may count against him, but Curran would appear keen for consideration.

Spinning stocks

The retirement of Stokes may be bad news for Shoaib Bashir, who is now tough to see being squeezed in, even if Curran is seen as a seam-bowling replacement. England have put a lot of time into their pet spin project, though Bashir hasn't maybe kicked on in the way that he, and they, would have liked. The tweakers could well be crucial at the end of a dry, hot summer, mind – will North et al. explore alternative specialists, or even consider playing two in the same team? That may bring Bashir back in, though the time may have come for a look elsewhere.

Top order trouble?

Jacob Bethell's withdrawal from the Hundred came with a warning that further assessment was required for a knee injury that could put his place against Pakistan in peril. No further information has yet been forthcoming, but England will want their No 3 in situ to continue to build experience and form in Test cricket after a couple of bad dismissals against New Zealand.

Jacob Bethell is a slight injury doubt for England *(Getty)*

Can Emilio Gay be said to be totally sure of his place at the top of the order? Gay was a victim of the Stokes-instigated chaos at the end of the Trent Bridge Test, eventually coming in at No 6, and has made a solid-if-unspectacular start to life at international level. It would be mightily harsh to not give him at least another series, though any potential Bethell absence could necessitate a reshuffle.

A problem of plenty

When speaking after the Fleming and Root appointments on Friday, Rob Key was eager to point out his excitement about England's seamers, noting the way Gus Atkinson, Sonny Baker and Josh Tongue had been bowling in the Hundred as evidence of their fulfilling of all-format potential. Key, rightly, also noted the consistency that Jofra Archer has found since being rested for the first of the New Zealand Tests. Brydon Carse is back bowling, too, after a long lay-off and may come into the thinking when the squad is named for Pakistan – though is maybe a more limited bowler than others.

England’s fast bowler Jofra Archer has been in good form of late *(PA)*

If a spinner is selected at No 7, there may be room for four quicks but ensuring complementary skillsets will be key. Ollie Robinson had a strange series with his ability still not in question, and a lack of accurate alternatives with the new ball may see him feature again. Archer is a virtual certainty to start but will probably not play all three Tests. Pakistan struggled against the West Indies’ high-class seamers in the first Test in Trinidad and England appear to have an array of options to try to trouble them.

Any statement selections?

A fresh era can bring with it fresh perspective on the construction of a cricket team. With North still new to his role, Fleming arriving and Root returning, it may be that the trio seek a departure in some ways from the McCullum/Stokes axis that has gone before. Both Fleming and Root have, in the past, shown a predilection for adaptability – Fleming’s CSK sides would regularly bat deep and mix up multifaceted orders, while Root enjoyed success with an England team of all-rounders in the past.

To enact something similar would require a significant shift, though it may be that new eyes see individuals differently – where does Jamie Smith best fit? What is the messaging to Harry Brook? Does the style need to change? While Fleming may not yet be in England, the next few weeks could say a lot about the side he wants to build.

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Sports news in brief

Australia bounced back from a shock semi-final defeat to secure bronze at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow *(PA)*

England netballers are crushed by Australia again

England missed out on a netball medal after suffering a second crushing defeat to Australia on the final day of the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. The Roses fell away after a promising first quarter to lose 68-50, emulating their earlier 66-47 defeat to the Diamonds in the group phase.

Australia, who had been forced to quickly regroup after Saturday's stunning last-gasp semi-final loss to Jamaica, dominated the second half of the contest to secure the bronze medal. It is the first time Australia have not contested a netball final since the sport was introduced to the Games in 1998.

New Zealand overcame Jamaica to secure their third Commonwealth Games title and complete an unbeaten tournament. The Silver Ferns had been too strong for England on Saturday and ended the Sunshine Girls' hopes of becoming just the fourth team to claim gold.

Wiebes stays in yellow in Tour de France Femmes

Dutch rider Lorena Wiebes repeated her opening-stage success with a sprint win on stage two of the Tour de France Femmes in Geneva yesterday and extended her overall lead. The Team SD Worx-Protime rider was first to attack from the bunch coming to the end of the 147.9km ride from Aigle, and easily held off her rivals with time to raise her arms in celebration before the line.

"I knew that it was up to me to find my own way," said Wiebes, whose seventh Tour de France stage win was her first while wearing the yellow jersey. "I found some good wheels and I could come out I think [with] around 200 metres to go and then I just could launch my sprint."

Italian Elisa Balsamo came in second ahead of Marianne Vos of the Netherlands. Wiebes earned a 10-second time bonus for the stage win and now holds a 14-second lead over Kimberley Le Court of Mauritius, with 2023 winner Demi Vollering a further two seconds back in third.

The stage got its anticipated sprint finish after Riejanne Markus made a brave bid for solo success only to get reeled in with less than 500 metres left, and Wiebes – last year's points classification winner – was always favourite to triumph at that stage. Today's stage three is a 156.5km ride from Geneva to Poligny in France.

Vickery pledges to donate brain for research

Former England rugby captain Phil Vickery has pledged to donate his brain for research into the damage caused by head injuries, having been diagnosed with probable chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). Vickery, part of the side that won the 2003 Rugby World Cup, was given a probable diagnosis two years ago, though CTE – believed to be caused by repeated brain injuries – can only be confirmed after death.

The 50-year-old is part of the concussion lawsuit involving more than 1,000 players that accuses World Rugby, England's Rugby Football Union (RFU), the Welsh Rugby Union and the Rugby Football League of failing in their duty of care to protect those involved in the game.

Vickery, who toured twice with the British and Irish Lions and won 73 caps for England, has admitted he has considered taking his own life but wants to ensure his brain can be used to further research into neurodegenerative diseases.

"Is that gonna make someone stand up?" Vickery said in an interview with *The Observer*. "I don't know. What a horrible thing to say. But what does it have to take? With the knowledge that we have now, it makes you wanna cry. Because it's fucking awful. Brain injuries are with you all the time, 24/7, 365 days a year, and it weighs heavy, and it grinds at you all the time. It won't beat me. You know, I keep going."

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